The Significance of the Central Asian Objects in the Shōsōin for Understanding the International Art Trade in the Seventh and Eighth Centuries

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The Significance of the Central Asian Objects in the Shōsōin for Understanding the International Art Trade in the Seventh and Eighth Centuries

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In the first half of the eighth century CE, the Japanese Emperor Shōmo acquired a number of foreign objects. Among these were some of Central Asian or Mediterranean manufacture and others made in Chinese workshops but based on western prototypes. Many of these exotic pieces were deposited by his widow, Dowager Empress Komyo, in the treasure house of the Tōdai-ji temple–monastery at Nara not long after his death. These form an excellent representative sample of the high-quality goods that moved along the Silk Road in the eighth century, and — because Japan was a passive recipient of these objects rather than a player in the dynamic life of the Silk Roads economy — they offer a glimpse into the ways in which objects could acquire significance and importance as they were moved from one cultural setting to another. The Japanese court did not then receive foreign objects obtained on the open market in Japan, and Japanese taste, per se, was not influencing the production of foreign workshops. In some instances, an item itself or the prototype for the newly crafted work had no particular significance within the region of origin. They acquired importance as they were moved

1 A version of this article was presented at the annual meetings of the World History Association in Savannah, Georgia, July 2, 2015. The funding for the research trip to Japan was made possible through the generosity of the Richard and Pamela Ader Green and Gold Professorship. I wish to thank Atsuhiko Ogata, Chief of Textile Arrangement and Research Section of the Shōsōin Treasure House, and his daughter Akiko for taking time to show me aspects of the collection during my visit to Nara. I would also like to thank Thomas Noel of the University of Vermont Chinese Language Program for help with the Romanization of Chinese names, and the anonymous reviewers for their suggestions, though all statements, opinions, and mistakes in the paper remain my own.
along the various networks that joined together the Eurasian continent. Items that were commonplace in one setting were exotic in another. Something that functioned in the domestic context in which it was crafted could become suitable for sacred use in a new setting. Yet these works were all thought to be appropriate as gifts to the emperor and were considered worthy to be placed into the protective custody of the temple by the dowager empress.

THE SHŌSŌIN AND THE COLLECTION

Though the exact date for the construction of the storehouses (shōsō) that form the precinct (in), or shōsōin, of the Tōdai-ji temple–monastery at Nara is not known, the records that do survive indicate that the north storeroom was available for the repository of the approximately 650 gifts to the Tōdai-ji made by the dowager empress Komyo in 756 CE (Kennedy 1996: 148). This date indicates that the Shōsōin was functioning five years after the completion of the Tōdai-ji temple, ordered by Emperor Shōmu and overseen by the first abbot, Roben (Hayashi 1975: 11–12). However, it should be noted that dendrochronological studies of the tree rings in the main pillar of the central section indicate that the tree was felled almost fifteen years earlier, in 741 CE (Nara National Museum 2012: 9).

The Tōdai-ji was the chief temple–monastery in the network of Buddhist monasteries established by Emperor Shōmu in 741 CE and known as Kokubun-ji. As the dominant temple–monastery in the system and as the major Buddhist center in the newly restored capital at Heijō, the Tōdai-ji was the center for rituals for the peace of the nation and the prosperity of the people. It was therefore the appropriate venue to which dowager empress Komyo made her gift of possessions of the deceased emperor Shōmu. The abdicated emperor passed away on May 2, 756 CE, and, after the forty-nine days of mourning prescribed by Buddhist law, the dowager empress offered the Universal Buddha (Rushana or Vairocana), housed in the Tōdai-ji monastery–temple, the emperor’s favorite personal and household belongings, 650 objects in all. The gifts were offerings to the Buddha to help confer merit on the deceased emperor and to destroy all sins. The empress penned a prolegomenon in which she stated,
So I desire to give succor to his august spirit by the performance of this good deed and therefore, for the sake of the late emperor, these various articles which he handled — girdles, ivory scepters, bows and arrows, collection of calligraphy, musical instruments, and the rest, which are in truth rare national treasures — I donate to the Todai-ji as a votive offering to Vairocana Buddha, various other buddhas, bodhisattvas, and all the saints. (Hayashi 1975: 34–36)²

In addition to this initial bequest in 756 CE, the empress made four more benefactions in 756 and 758. These objects were all collected together and placed in the north and central storerooms of the Shōsōin, where they remained until radical restructuring after World War II.³ Included in the first gift was a catalogue of the items, the *Kokka Chimpo-cho* (Catalogue of Rare National Treasures), to which the empress’s prolegomenon was added, and these two items together form the first volume of the *Tōdai-ji Kemmotsu-cho* (Catalogue of Gifts Dedicated to the Tōdai-ji). It is thus possible to isolate within the larger collection of the Shōsōin some of the items that formed this mid-eighth-century grouping (Kennedy 1996: 148). This makes the objects in the collection that can be traced back to the north and central storerooms of the Shōsōin a type of archaeological assemblage such that these objects form a kind of sealed deposit for which the dating is quite specific.

The donated objects provide a rare opportunity to fully study examples of portable court art from the Nara period. These pieces represented the highest echelon of art, either manufactured by Japanese artists or introduced as exotic, foreign wares, and because of their subsequent careful treatment over the intervening 1300 years, they include some of the finest surviving specimens of eighth century CE artwork to be found anywhere in the world,⁴ though some of the textiles in particular have suffered deterioration (Kennedy 1996: 149), and fragments have been dispersed from

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² Adapted from J. Harada’s translation in “The Shoso-in, or Imperial Repository at Nara,” in Harada 1937.

³ Since 1960 the entire Shōsōin collection has been stored in a climate-controlled building. The Shōsōin itself is empty and is treated as a national historic landmark.

⁴ Not all objects survived well. Many of the stored pieces, particularly textiles, have deteriorated over the centuries (Kennedy 1996: 150–151).
the holdings (Shepherd 1955: 125). Because the emperor's collection included many pieces of foreign, western manufacture or of western-inspired Japanese craftsmanship, the Shōsōin provides us with a rare opportunity to examine the types of high-quality artworks that circulated from west to east along the silk roads. Because Japan was not an active participant in the Silk Road network, but was instead a passive receiver, the Silk Road items it received had passed through a kind of screening process before they were taken to the island nation. These foreign goods provide a generous sample of the types of exotica that were able to attain significance in their new cultural setting.

**EARLIER SCHOLARSHIP**

About 95 percent of the roughly nine thousand objects in the collection of the Shōsōin date to the Tempyo period (Tsunoda 1952: 212). However, some of the items have become damaged and have broken apart. More than 100,000 fragments of textiles are listed on the inventories (Hayashi 1975: 154). The works are now under the control of the Imperial Household Properties (Hayashi 1975: 13), are not on permanent public display and are no longer stored in the Shōsōin (Kennedy 1996: 148–150). Only once a year, in the autumn, is a selection of the items shown in the Exhibition of Shōsō-in Treasures at the Nara National Museum, a practice that began in 1883 and did not become a regular event until 1946 (Kennedy 1996: 150); it is still the case that objects from the collection are being shown to the public for the first time (Nara National Museum 2011: 5).

The collection has been actively studied since the late nineteenth century. However, the limited access has restricted the nature of the scholarship, and to date most has been in Japanese. There are a number of publications in English that highlight various portions of the collection and offer a broader scholarly audience the opportunity to use the collection. Today a portion of the collection is accessible online through the Shōsōin website. Since many of the items were labelled by the curators of the collection at the time of the donation or at some later point, there is knowledge about how some of the pieces were regarded in earlier periods. Several of the objects now treated as either of foreign origin or based on foreign prototypes were so acknowledged by the original

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6 Shosoin.kunaicho.go.jp/en-US
caretakers. English language catalogues of the collection have been regularly published (Shuko 1909; Harada 1932; Shosoin Office 1965). And the complete collection was published in a comprehensive catalogue in Japanese. In 1975, R. Hayashi’s Japanese survey of the objects that could be traced to western sources on the Silk Roads was reissued in an English translation in the Heibonsha Survey of Japanese Art as *The Silk Road and the Shoso-in*. This remains the most comprehensive review of this portion of the collection in any language other than Japanese. Several scholars have treated specific sub-categories of object types that have Silk Road connections: see K. Matsumoto (1984) and Ogata (2012) for textiles, and Sgimura and Tsukamoto for glass. Shōsōin pieces regularly occur in any study of trade along the Silk Road in the seventh-eighth centuries CE, such as Laing 1991 and An 2004. Moreover, specific items in the Shōsōin that are accepted as being of Central Asian or western manufacture or based on prototypes from those regions are regularly used in comparative studies.

Valerie Hansen has pointed out that many of the objects that moved along the Silk Roads did so in small caravans of just a few merchants and animals, sometimes as small as a single merchant with some pack animals (2012: 78–79, 103). Most traders had to select items that were both easy to carry and would fetch a return worth the effort. Unlike the large-scale bulk trade by sea routes that linked the eastern Mediterranean to India as early as the Hellenistic period and connected with China later in the Tang (Krahl, Guy, Wilson, and Raby 2010), the land caravan trade depended on each item carried to have adequate value to make the trip profitable (Hansen 2003: 15). Archaeological work in China over the last few decades has greatly enhanced our understanding of where foreign western goods and Chinese versions based on those prototypes ended up. It is now possible to move beyond isolating a possible source for an exotic object or Chinese copy to actually positing the way in which the item might have operated in new settings. Not everything that could have been moved from a western place of origin to an eastern recipient made the trip. Clearly the selection of what was to be moved was driven in part by the way in which a foreign object could be fit into an existing cultural context, and that context often changed.

The foreign pieces and native works based on foreign models in the Shōsōin present an even more complex picture. These objects probably did not enter Japan as exotic pieces to be sold on the

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7 *Shōsōin Zuroku*, 16 volumes, 1928–1945.
open market. They had to be considered to have some type of value that made them suitable as gifts to the emperor. In Chinese courts of the Han through the Northern dynasties, for which there exists a literary record, certain types of exotica, mostly unusual natural things like the “blood-sweating” horses from Fergana or asbestos cloth, were recorded as a special category: tribute, presented to the emperor as a gift of submission or good will or payment for a particular privilege. These items did not enter China for the market and most likely never went outside the palace (Liu 1988: 53). None of the objects from the Shōsōin discussed in this article would have qualified as tribute in the Chinese setting, and they were probably not offered in this way in Japan. They were gifts. This article is an attempt to discern how a select group of pieces in the Shōsōin acquired a privileged position within the larger panoply of items moving along the trade routes of the Silk Roads.

The investigation of the western holdings in the original donations to the Shōsōin offers more than just a better understanding of one aspect of Silk Road studies, and this can draw someone like myself — whose scholarly background is quite unrelated to the study of Asian and Silk Road history — to undertake this investigation. Overall our understanding of how ancient and early medieval cultures interacted in terms of expropriating foreign cultural forms is still not well developed. That it happened is undeniable, but what caused certain forms to exert influence while others did not is a topic debated in the study of ancient art. One need only consider the numerous discussions of how and why the quite distinct and self-aware Roman culture made use of Greek forms. The meaning of Horace’s line, “Captive Greece took captive her rude conqueror” is still a point of argument in Roman studies. The emperor Shōmu’s collection in the Shōsōin is uniquely important for this type of exploration because it sheds light on a specific moment in the long history of East–West exchange on the Silk Road. Here, unusually, the historical realities of the moment can be confidently reconstructed, because the origin points for many of the objects can be reasonably posited and their possible movements east reconstructed, and because the roles played by the intermediary cultures through which the objects passed can be justly considered. This is remarkable for the study of ancient and

8 My own work has focused on an examination of this topic in the study of the spread of Roman architectural forms to the conquered western provinces (1999) and in the jettisoning, retention, and borrowing of architectural forms in the transition from Late Bronze Age to Early Iron Age in the ancient Levant (2012).

9 Book 2, epistle 1, line 156: Graecia capta ferum victorem cepit.
early medieval art, for which it is often impossible to be certain about basic facts such as the dates of the objects being analyzed. To examine the ways in which these specific objects could have been moved and how and what might have influenced their final forms allows us to form a much more nuanced understanding of the mechanics involved in the process of artistic diffusion. Though one cannot draw overarching conclusions from this study, it can offer some suggestions for how the study of the spread and dissemination of foreign artistic forms in other regions might be approached.

THE SETTING

Roman and Byzantine, Sasanian Persian, or Central Asian Sogdian items found in the Shōsōin can be divided into three groups for study: those that are clearly of western origin, those of Chinese manufacture but inspired by western forms, and those of Japanese, or Tempyo, craftsmanship, but based on foreign prototypes. The categories of goods are limited to glassware, gilt silver vases and bowls, textiles, musical instruments, and dance masks, all portable works. The objects testify to the degree that influences from the west, particularly from the Sasanian and Sogdian regions, had come to permeate even the far eastern islands, and they also offer some idea of the nature of what was considered to be worthy of preservation among these foreign goods.

The middle of the eighth century was a time of transition in Central Asia. Tang China was fully integrated into the west-east- and south-north-flowing currents of the Silk Road system. The Sasanian Empire, which had controlled Iran as a centralized state and wielded political and cultural power in much of Central Asia, collapsed to advancing Muslim Arab forces in 651, and the political and cultural capital shifted from Iran west to Syria and Damascus with the founding of the Umayyad dynasty. A little over a century later, in 750 CE, the Abbasid Caliphate was established, overthrowing the Umayyad caliphate and moving the political and cultural hub of Islam back east, where Baghdad was founded in 762. In 751 CE, the Tang army was defeated by the armies of Islam in the battle of Talas,

10 Consider our lack of knowledge about the period at which a Roman “copy” of a supposed lost Greek original was made — Late Republican, Augustan, or Hadrianic? Without a good archaeological context, scholarly discussions become mired in debates about stylistic forms. The dates for Gandharan sculpture still elude us, making any real investigation of what exact influences were at play difficult to tease out.
thus ending the Tang attempt to re-establish Han Chinese control of the Xinjiang region. Between 755
and 763 CE the Tang Empire itself was pulled asunder by the An Lushan rebellion, which effectively
ended the first period of Tang greatness. So the western pieces in the collection of Emperor Shōmu
represent what was available on the Silk Road system in the century after the fall of the Sasanians and
before the advent of the Abbasids and the end of the domination of the Tang. The Japanese court was
obtaining this western material through China and Korea, primarily in the guise of diplomatic gifts
and Buddhist monastic donations. Before these works entered Japan they were vetted at the highest
echelons in China or Korea and selected because they were deemed of appropriate value to be sent to
the Japanese court or an imperial monastery.

GLASS

The alkali-lime glass cup (ruri) colored with cobalt for its deep blue (Fig. 1),\(^\text{11}\) one of only three glass
items in the Shōsōin from the initial deposit (Hayashi 1975: 88, fig. 16),\(^\text{12}\) was produced by blowing the
foundation vessel into a mold and then melting glass rods onto the surface to attach the twenty-two
circular coils arranged in three horizontal registers of eight, eight, and six loops on the exterior
(Sugiyama nd: 547). A gilt-silver base was attached as the foot using lacquer (Nara National Museum
2012: 25).

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\(^{11}\) Treasure number Middle Section 70; see p. 1 of the glass category on shosoin.kunaicho.go.jp/en-US. Hayashi 1975: fig. 16.

\(^{12}\) Sugiyama nd: 547 cites the existence of seven glass vessels in the Shōsōin collection, all in the Middle Section (Chūso).
Laing 1991: 115 cites the existence of six glass vessels, though these include pieces that were added after the initial deposit.
Figure 1. Glass cup. Treasure number: Middle Section 70. Courtesy of the Shosoin Treasure House, Nara, Japan. Photograph printed by Benrido.
Glass vessels were being produced in Chinese and Japanese workshops as early as the second century BCE (Sugiyama nd, 551; An 2002: 81), but the chemical composition of eastern glass contained a high percentage of barium lead, unlike the western glass, which was soda-lime based (Laing 1991: 109). The shapes, colors, and uses of native glass were limited to small opaque pieces, and exports of western glass, particularly bigger pieces of transparent blown glass, found a welcoming reception in eastern contexts. Roman glass first entered China during the Han period (An 2004: 57). Chinese records show two terms for glass, liu-li, describing the small opaque items of Chinese manufacture, and pol-li, which came to refer to imported transparent glass (Liu 1988: 58–60). By the sixth century CE, Mediterranean glass was augmented with Sasanian products. These Sasanian forms continued to be made and exported to the east into the early Islamic period.

Awareness of the existence of glass workshops in Parthian and Sasanian Persia is relatively recent, and owes much to the scholarship and archaeological investigations of Japanese researchers (Whitehouse 2005: 9–11). To date, the cobalt blue stemmed goblet is unique in its combination of form, color, and exterior treatment. However, glass appliqués, bosses, and medallions, most commonly figured, were a feature of late Sasanian and early Islamic imitation Sasanian glass vessels (Whitehouse 2005: 30). The piece could well be a late Sasanian or early Islamic period product from an Iranian glass workshop. Cups decorated with three-dimensional bosses or countersunk circular facets or applied medallions or circular rings have been found in excavations in the Sasanian levels at Qasr-i Abu in Iran. Cobalt-rich mineral deposits were to be found in Iran, which would have allowed for the coloring, and the fact that the silver foot was gilt, a favorite Sasanian metalworking technique, might increase the argument for a Sasanian provenance for the vase in the Shōsōin, though it needs to be noted that Laing has argued that the foot was added later, in the Meiji period, as a replacement for an earlier base (Laing 1991: 115). Glass pieces with similar decoration have also been excavated from Chinese tombs at Guyuan in Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region and Barchuk in Xinjiang and in Japan at the Munakata shrine on Okinoshima island (Whitehouse 2005: no. 50), which indicates the demand for such objects in eastern contexts.

Though the cup shape is unusual in comparison to the other cups identified as of foreign manufacture in Japanese and Chinese settings, there is a glass cup used as a relic container and decorated in a similar manner from the pagoda of Songyim-sa Temple near Taegu (Daegu) in Korea.
that has led some to conclude that the Shōsōin piece was made in Korea or at least entered Japan through Korea (Laing 1991: 115, fig. 19). Korean workshops had been importing lead-barium glass beads from China to string into impressive necklaces of multiple strands from as early as the third century BCE, and a number of blown glass objects of Roman manufacture have been unearthed in tombs in the Kingdom of Silla (Lee 2013: plates 59–63, 67–68). Hayashi thought that the cobalt blue cup was eastern Roman work (Hayashi 1975: foldout 1). Roman glass workers knew how to produce cobalt blue glass by adding cobalt oxide from a mineral like asbolite to the molten glass (Fleming 1999: 141–143). Glass vessels with applied medallion-like decoration have been found in Roman contexts in both eastern and northern contexts, though they were never usual types (Fleming 1999: no. E. 102; Pinder-Wilson 1970: 71) and were not among the four most common motifs used by eastern Roman glass makers from the fourth century onwards (Fleming 1999: 113).

There is also a faceted cup, in excellent condition, in the Shōsōin holdings. The hemispherical bowl, of glass graduating from clear to amber to white, is decorated on the exterior with three horizontal rows of concave facets (Laing 1991: 118). It is one example of a larger corpus of such vessels that have been found in China and westward into the Caucasus region (Expedition 2014: no. 207) and in Japan (Sugiyama nd: 541–547), where one was found in the fourth-century tomb of the emperor Nintoku (Scerrato 1961: 8) and another in the sixth-century tomb of the emperor Ankan (Laing 1991: fig. 26).

Faceted glass, which was produced by blowing the vessel into a mold and then grinding, cutting, and polishing hollow facets, was first developed in eastern Roman glass workshops. An early version of a faceted cup is probably represented on a funerary stele from Palmyra (Scerrato 1961: 8), and it is probably a Roman cup that was found in one of the graves at the Yingpan necropolis in Xinjiang (Grand View 1999: no. 0531). However, Sasanian glass workers created their own distinctive style with overall patterns of contiguous hexagonal facets (Whitehouse 2005: 11), which describes the piece in the Shōsōin (Hayashi 1975: 89, fig. 91). The excavations in Gilan province in northwest Iran


14 Treasure number Middle Section 68. Can be seen on p. 1 of the glass category on shosoin.kunaicho.go.jp/en-US. Hayashi 1975: 91.
have turned up several versions of faceted glass vessels (Scerrato 1961: 8). Yoshimizu argued that the faceted cups were an industrial production made most likely near or in the Sasanian imperial capital at Ctesiphon (Laing 1991: 118). The find spots in Gilan province represent the movement of glassware to commercial nodes in the east-west trade network. Sugiyama, following Taniichi Takashi, has isolated the production site to Kish (Sugiyama nd: 547). The finds of faceted cups, identified as Roman, from tombs in Silla, indicate that Korea could also have been the supplier of the faceted cup in the Shōsōin.

A transparent white glass carafe, a *kohei*, can be paralleled by similar vessels found in Iranian contexts (Hayashi 1975: 93, figs. 98, 99), and it resembles in shape the better known silver ewers of Sasanian origin. The piece's low-bellied shape enters a tapered neck and ends in an everted spout designed for pouring. The handle was attached separately at the middle of the body and arches over the neck to join at the spout (Sugiyama nd: 547). Pinder-Wilson identifies the object as sixth-seventh-century Persian (1970: 71), while Yoshimizu argues that it is early Islamic (Laing 1991: 118). While it is most likely that this piece came through China and into Japan, it is not impossible that Korea was the point of transmission. A similar ewer, found in the south mound of Hwangnam Daechong tomb, is slightly more elongated and is decorated with a blue glass thread around the neck that picks up the blue band along the lip and the blue handle (Lee 2013: 124–125, fig. 6.5). Insook Lee identifies this as a late Roman, fourth-century work, and it might be possible to argue that it was of Rhineland manufacture (Fleming 1999: 116). It suggests that the rulers of Silla were obtaining a variety of highly prized glass works possibly via the nomadic middlemen who acquired them north of the Black Sea and then brought them east as objects for diplomatic exchange with the rulers of Silla.

Because none of the eastern workshops could produce glass to rival the variety of shapes, the decorated forms, or the lustrous transparency of the finished products that western studios were able to manufacture, foreign glass was highly valued and was transported east. In China, in the centuries of chaos following the collapse of the Han dynasty, foreign glass objects had become visual signifiers of wealth (An 2004: 59), included with other rare pieces in crystal, agate, or even jade. They were items of display, often associated with wine drinking, and became objects of aesthetic interest on their own, as revealed by a poem, “Ode to a Glass Bowl,” by Pan Ni, written during the Western Jin (265–316), or the
remark by Prince Zhou extolling the lucid quality of a glass bowl in his possession, as recorded in the *Shishuo xinyu* (Yiqing Liu, Jun Liu and Mather 2002: 473).

In the elite strata of Chinese society, glass vessels had specific roles. They had probably entered in part because of their association with grape wine drinking, which was a western, Sogdian, pastime that found a home with some high-ranking Han Chinese. In time the special qualities of the glass itself allowed the pieces to be incorporated into the aesthetic system. Glass cups, ewers, and plates were visual statements of wealth, of a specific elite activity, and of a rarified aesthetic appreciation. Glass was carried in the trade caravans that moved across the northern Taklimakan route, which is why there are glass finds among the burial offerings of tombs from this region of Xinjiang. This would explain, in part, why glass vessels made in the workshops at Ctesiphon, accepting Yoshimizu's theory, would have ended up in trade nodes in the Gilan region. Glass pieces were moved north to be readily available as trade objects. Moreover, the glass must have entered primarily as a commercial item, something exotic to be purchased at the western market in Chang-An.

Whether something similar was at work in the kingdom of Silla is not so clear. While most western glass coming into China must have come over the caravan route of the northern Taklamakan road, allowing for both Mediterranean and Sasanian Persian and later early Islamic Iranian glass works to appear in the western market at Chang-an, the transmission of western glass to the Korean kingdom of Silla may have been quite different. The Korean kingdom was actually affiliated with the nomadic peoples to China's north. Many of the elements of regal display found in the royal tombs of Silla show strong parallels to finds from high-status burials in the steppes (Lee and Leidy 2013: 8–9). This connection might indicate that the presence of some of the foreign glass in the tombs was less the result of commercial exchange than of some type of gift-giving relationship between the rulers of Silla and the nomadic leaders.

Glass objects similar to those found in Korea have also been excavated in sites along the Black Sea and southern Russia (I. Lee 2013: 127). These exotic objects formed part of the panoply of nomadic chiefs who then included them in their burial caches. As signifiers of high status, they were appropriate gifts to sedentary rulers on the periphery, such as those of the Silla kingdom. This might explain the unusual shape of the cobalt blue vessel from the Shōsōin and its possible cousin, the relic container from the Korean temple. Conically-shaped glass cups were a common product of the glass
works in Roman Germany. Glass production in this region thrived and expanded during the fourth century CE as new forms and new techniques of decoration were introduced (Fleming 1999: 107–111). Finds of Roman glass in the Pontic region indicate that the nomadic populations had access to them. Moreover, since western glass had acquired high status associations in Han China that continued into the Tang period, it is not surprising that it would have held similar meaning for the nomadic elite living to the north of China. Honeychurch, building on the work of Lattimore, has argued that in the Xiongnu nomadic polity (209 BCE – 150 CE) foreign luxury items, like imported glass such as the blue-and-white ribbed bowl found in elite Xiongnu platform burial 30 at Gol Mod 2, operated in a “prestige good economy.” The possession of such items was important enough to assure that the Xiongnu elite established and maintained long-distance relationships rather than depending on casual commercial exchanges, which probably marked the Chinese pattern of acquisition (Honeychurch 2015: 54, 66–67, fig. 4.7, 72). A similar type of “prestige good economy” may have been operating in the nomadic confederations near the Korean peninsula, the Murong Xianbei and the Tuoba Xianbei, during the formation of the Silla kingdom. Several of the finds in the royal tombs of the Silla kings show evidence of being from or influenced by the nomadic workshops (Leidy and Soyoung Lee 2013: 91).

The western glass finds in Korea could then have been passed through the nomadic chiefdoms eventually to be presented in Silla, perhaps as diplomatic gifts. This could also have been the vehicle by which the cobalt blue cup eventually came into the possession of Emperor Šōmu. The Zenrin Kokuhōki by Zuikei Shūhō, which records Japan’s foreign relations from the seventh to the thirteenth centuries CE, contains a reference to tribute items sent in 688 CE by the king of Silla to the Japanese court as a mourning offering for the late ruler, Tenmu. Though glass vessels are not mentioned, they might well have been among the uncategorized objects (Verschuer 1999: 21). These glass vessels could have functioned as drinking cups. Sugiyama (nd: 554), based on an episode in the life of the emperor Yūryaku contained in the Kojiki, argued that there was a practice of occasionally dedicating drinking cups, which might explain how the faceted cup entered the Shōsōin collection (Ō no Yasumaro and Heldt 2014: 168–172).

It is clear that foreign glass items could circulate in elite contexts in China, Korea, and probably Japan. As such, they were visual statements of elite status and probably of refined taste. It might be safe to assume that the Chinese elite established the relationship with the category of
objects and the Korean and Japanese elite followed suit. However, there is another quite different, though related, force that served to move western glass into eastern cultural contexts and to give it an important position: Buddhism. Xinru Liu (1988: 92–95) has argued that among the early Sanskrit Buddhist texts, the *Mahāvastu* (The Great Event) is the first to codify the *sapta-ratna* as a consistent list of seven items that were appropriate precious substances to associate with the Buddha: *suvaṇa* (gold), *rūpya* (silver), *vaḍūryā* (lapis lazuli), *muktā* (pearl), *lohitikā* (red precious stone or red coral), *musāragalva* (ammonite, agate, or coral), and *sphāṭika* (crystal or quartz). It seems quite likely that *sphāṭika* (crystal or quartz) could be represented by glass: glass beads are abundant at Kushan Buddhist sites. It is probably in this role as a version of *sphāṭika* that it appears in representations of rituals in paintings from the Mogao caves at Dunhuang. An Jiayao has isolated eight depictions of glass vessels shown in the paintings (An 2002: 87–89, fig. 9).

In Cave 217 a bodhisattva holds forward a transparent plate as an offering dish. It is quite a specific rendering, a transparent dish spotted with blue blobs. An Jiayao has identified it as a painted representation of a Sasanian faceted plate (An 2004: 64, fig. 570). Insook Lee reads it as a representation of a Roman blue blob plate (Lee 2013: 126–127, fig. 6.11). The finding of a transparent cup decorated with applied blue blobs in a tomb in Geumnyeongchong, Korea, suggests that this particular type of western glass, produced in the fourth century CE (Fleming 1999: 107–111), had made its way east and perhaps had acquired the veneer of an even rarer heirloom-type object, since by the time of the Tang dynasty it was no longer being produced in the West. It is given additional importance in that it is shown being held by a bodhisattva (An 2002: fig. 9). Another painted version of a glass object from the Mogao Caves, this time a faceted bowl, looks to reproduce a Sasanian faceted cup. Obviously it also functioned perfectly in Buddhist ritual settings.

**METALWORK**

Among the Shōsōin collections is an elliptical eight-lobed gilt copper cup (Fig. 2) (Hayashi 1975: 89–90). The shape identifies the prototype as Sasanian (Gunter and Jett 1992: nos. 30 and 31). The gilt

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15 Treasure number South Section 20, gilt copper eight-lobed oval cup, no. 1. Other views can be seen at p. 5 of the metal category on shosoin.kunaicho.go.jp/en-US. Hayashi (1975: fig. 94) identifies the metal as bronze.
copper cup was probably a copy made by a metal workshop in Tang China or Tempyo Japan (Nara Nationa Museum 2012: no. 52), since copper was not the normal medium for such vessels in Sasanian Persia. Sasanian silversmiths produced objects of great demand in the North and East. Many of the originals with proveniences have been found in kurgans, the graves of nomad chiefs. Silver was the desired metal in the nomadic regions of Central Asia (Frye 1993: 74). Whether these were products intended for commercial exchange or were produced in royal workshops to be used in diplomatic exchanges with northern peoples is a debated point, but clearly some of them ended up in China, which had been bringing in western silver since the late first millennium BCE (Harper 2002: 95–113).
**Figure 2.** Gilt copper eight-lobed oval cup, seen from underneath, No. 1. Treasure number: South Section 20. Courtesy of the Shosoin Treasure House, Nara, Japan. Photograph printed by Benrido.
In the societal context in which these vessels were created and where they initially functioned, they were attributes of a Persian aristocratic lifestyle from the Achaemenid through the Sasanian periods (Marshak 2005: 47). They were banquet tableware (Gunter 1988: 42–45), and as such they could also function in the steppe cultures. They were intrinsically valuable and portable, the perfect visual signifiers of elite status in nomadic societies. In China, silver had no meaning in the traditional scale of values, though it was one of the “seven treasures” of the Buddha (Mino 1986: 151). However, the appearance of these western silver objects in elite Chinese graves probably resulted more from the increasing engagement that the Chinese rulers had with the western nomadic peoples beginning in the Han dynasty than with the introduction of Buddhism.

By the time of the Tang dynasty, when large areas of Central Asia were under direct rule, the Tang emperors and the court had adopted some of the practices of the steppe chiefs, perhaps as a means of forging better relationships with non-Han Chinese subjects, and banqueting, which was already a feature of Chinese court life, now could include these silver drinking vessels (Marshak 2005: 47). Chinese metalworking shops began producing objects clearly inspired by Sasanian forms (Michaelson 1999: no. 88). It is likely that some of the silver prototypes entered China with Sogdian traders who dominated the trading networks of the Silk Road during the seventh and eighth centuries CE. It is worth noting, however, that finished metalwork does not appear as an item of exchange in the Chinese sources that we possess for Sogdian merchants. We find mentions of gold (jìn), silver (yìn), copper (tóng), and brass (tòushi), but nothing indicating that these represent articles in these materials rather than the raw materials themselves. There is one mention of bowls but with no indication of the type (Skaff 2003: 510–511). These lobed-cup forms also could have come along with Sasanian artisans who fled east as the empire was destroyed to join an already existing Persian community in Chang-an (Treasures of Chang-an 1993: 31). They then began to make metal vessels for the Chinese market, which might explain the gilt copper version, because bronze was a metal of value in the traditional Chinese system, and the copper might have been an attempt to suggest bronze by artisans unskilled in working the more difficult metal.

These items may have begun life as expensive, high status commercial goods in their place of origin, but they then acquired added significance when they entered Tang court circles, even if
initially purchased at the western market in Chang'an. Once in the court setting, their value increased
when presented to the Chinese emperor, and this made them appropriate diplomatic gifts.

There is also a twelve-lobed cup of green glass (Hayashi 1975: 89–90). While the glass version
could be Sasanian, nothing like it has been found in Sasanian contexts. Its green glass form might
indicate that it was actually made in Tang China, especially since the material is lead glass, the older
Chinese type. By the fifth century CE there were glass workshops in China, possibly established by
western artisans, that were manufacturing blown glass for the Chinese market and for the court, at
least according to an account in the Beishu (History of the Northern Dynasties) (An 2004: 62–63).
Chinese artisans had been making barium lead green glass ear-cups to imitate jade cups as early as the
Western Han (An 2002: 81–82, fig. 3), and these were included as mortuary gifts, a cheaper version of
the highly sought-after jade, which was a precious material in the Chinese value system (An 2004: 57–
58, fig. 45). There is also a white jade cup carved in the form of a Sasanian lobed cup (Michaelson 1999,
no.70). It is certainly possible that, as the lobed silver cups found a market in China, local workshops
began to produce glass versions that imitated them in green glass, suggesting jade.

There is a lacquer ewer or kohei in the Shōsōin that is described in the Kokka Chimpo-chu,
though its source is not identified (Hayashi 1975: 90). The shape is modified from a gilt silver ewer
such as was produced by Sasanian, Sogdian, and Bactrian metalsmiths (Watt et al. 2004: no. 157), but
now the work is in lacquer, which is not a technique evidenced in the western areas. The form has
also been modified by the addition of the lid, which makes it look much more like Tang pottery
imitations of Central Asian silver ewers (Treasures of Chang-an 1993: no. 30), and the surface has been
ornamented with a silver foil inlay of birds, animals, and flowers in the Japanese heidatsu technique
(Tsunoda 1952: 214, fig. 7). This may be an attempt to capture something of the surface treatment of
Sasanian gilt silver ewers, but the motifs and the treatment are entirely different. It must either be a

16 Treasure number Middle Section 72. It can be seen on p. 2 of the glass category on shosoin.kunaicho.go.jp/en-US.
Hayashi 1975: fig. 78.

17 https://depts.washington.edu/silkroad/exhibit/sassanians/66_92.html; see entry for “Lobed repose bowl in the Seattle
Art Museum, no. 66.92.”

18 Treasure number North Section 43. It can be seen on p. 2 of the lacquer category on shosoin.kunaicho.go.jp/en-US.
Hayashi 1975: fig. 72.
Chinese product based on a Persian prototype, a well-known practice though better represented in Tang pottery than in lacquer ware, or it is from a Japanese lacquer workshop. This practice of taking foreign forms and then either reproducing them, as is possibly the case with the gilt copper lobed cup, or recreating them in different media, as seems to be the situation with the green glass cup or the lacquer ewer, introduces a different level into the discussion of the western items in the Shōsōin. It is one thing to collect exotica and then offer it to the Buddha as something rare and therefore precious, but quite another to imitate it and then incorporate it into the local art production. In the latter instance it appears that the foreign objects have acquired a local significance.

This would seem to be the best way to understand two jars, one of silver in the Shōsōin (Fig. 3), and the other a medicine jar of gilt silver in the Tōdai-ji (Hayashi 1975: 128, fig. 80), both decorated with hunters, one shown in the “Parthian shot” pose, a Persian motif. These vessels were probably the work of Chinese artisans, judging from the shapes and the techniques used for the surface treatments, neither of which are common on Sasanian gilt silver work. Similar ring-matted ground surfaces can be seen on a gold vessel used to heat medicine or wine, from the Hejia Village hoard that must date to the late seventh or early eighth century CE (Li Jian 2003: no. 101). Another vessel from the hoard, a gilt silver octagonal cup, shows scenes of hunters chasing down game portrayed in the flying gallop pose (Li Jian 2003: no. 104). The motif of the animals in flying gallop seen on both the Shōsōin jar and the octagonal cup, together with the archer turning back to take aim and fire, the pose known as the Parthian shot, shown on the Shōsōin jar, are clearly marks of Persian origin, as is the in-fill decoration of abundant plant life.

19 Treasure number South Section 13. Silver jar. Other views can be seen on p. 5 of the metal category on shosoin.kunaicho.go.jp/en-US. Hayashi 1975: figs. 54–55.
Figure 3. Silver jar. Treasure number: South Section 13. Courtesy of the Shosoin Treasure House, Nara, Japan. Photograph printed by Benrido.

The medicine jar was considered to be sufficiently significant to be included in the ritual offering deposit at the site of the Daibutsu-den of the Tōdai-ji. It was part of the set of chindan-gu, “instruments to charm the spirits of the dais,” or apotropaic objects placed beneath the altar (Mino: nos. 61–61A). In this instance the object’s silver material may have given it value more than did the motif. As one of the sapta-ratna (seven treasures), silver (rūpya) was an appropriate gift to include in the consecration offering. In a similar vein, the main value of the jar in the Shōsōin could have been
its material more than its decoration. It was an object considered suitable in Buddhist ritual and therefore of value to the emperor, like the cobalt blue glass vessel. However, if these vessels were products of Chinese workshops, their original value would have been quite different. Compared to gold, silver was not a valuable metal. This can be seen in the proportion of silver to gold objects recovered in the Hejia Village hoard: 38 gold objects, many quite small, as compared to 216 silver items, including several quite large vessels (Hansen 2003: 16). If Qi Dongfang is correct, and the hoard represents a collection of precious objects, many intended as tax payments and buried for safe keeping during the Jingyuan Mutiny (783 CE), then it is clear that silver ranked far below gold in intrinsic value if not in sacred meaning in the Tang Chinese context (Qi 2003: 23–24).

However these two vessels were ultimately used, they were probably not created as Buddhist ritual objects. Hayashi identifies these images of horseback hunters, one taking aim at an animal behind him in the pose known as the Parthian shot, as being of Sasanian inspiration, and he rightly points out that the motif is known from a few Sasanian gilt silver plates (Hayashi 1975: 126). The Sasanian representations are always of the emperor. The motif is clearly associated with royal iconography. The presentation of the king hunting a lion or a leopard belongs to the iconography of the “king of kings,” with the specific ruler indicated by the crown he wears (Marshak 1986: 23). That the motif was placed on a jar and stripped of all royal associations suggests a novel reworking of the motif by a foreign artisan, someone not imbued with any notions of appropriateness. The technique being used for the surface treatment betrays the non-Central Asian origin of the pieces. The horsemen are placed against a stippled background of ring matting, called nanako or fish roe, against which the horsemen and hunted animals appear as solid units. Moreover, the hunts take place in landscapes scattered throughout with grasses, flowers, birds, and even bits of topography. This is a quite different rendering than that of the royal Sasanian images, which have a more timeless and cosmic quality to them. These jars might well be considered the Chinese or even Japanese equivalents of European chinoiserie. A similar situation may well obtain for most of the finished gold and silver objects in the Hejia Village hoard. Several of the vessels can be seen to possess Sasanian and Sogdian design elements and decorative motifs, but these are reworked to create hybrid forms suggesting the hand of a foreign artist with little or no understanding of the meaning of the original (Hansen 2003: 16). Nor is the jar the only object to exhibit this type of repurposing of the western royal hunting motif for a
decorative purpose. There is a lute in the Shōsōin collection, its plectrum guard decorated with a similar hunting scene (Hayashi 1975: fig. 81), and a fragment of a silk brocade textile with four horsemen in the pose of the Parthian shot. ²⁰

TEXTILES

Among the best known pieces from the Shōsōin is a fragment of a larger silk textile with a woven repeated motif of four hunters in the Parthian shot pose confronting tigers arranged around a central unit of four mouflon and four trees, all set within a pearl roundel (Fig. 4). ²¹ A similar, though possibly earlier piece, comes from Hōryu-ji temple, though in this instance what divides the two groups of hunters is a single tree that occupies the middle (Hayashi 1975: fig. 82). Though the two textiles share the same motif of four hunters, there is a distinction between the evenly structured quadripartite composition of the Shōsōin piece and the somewhat simpler mirror image of the Hōryu-ji piece in which the axis takes precedence. The Hōryū-ji silk is a weft-faced compound twill also known as a samit. The warp threads are slightly twisted in an S direction, and the weft threads are raw silk without a twist (Kazuko 2006: 157). The Shōsōin piece should probably be considered to be the same (Wu Min 2006: 226). ²²

²⁰ There is a silk textile fragment from the one of the Astana tombs at Turfan that shows a hunter in the pose of the Parthian shot, “Cemeteries at Asitana, Turpan (Tulufan), Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region,” in Xiaoneng Yang 2004b: 384–387, entry u6.

²¹ Treasure number South Section 179. Silk fragments of a newly made screen, no. 6. Other views can be seen on p. 5 of the textile category on shosoin.kunaicho.go.jp/en-US. Hayashi 1975: fig. 13.

²² I can find no technical description of the Shōsōin piece, and Wu Min does not mention it specifically but references the Hōryū-ji silk.
Figure 4. A silk fragment mounted on a newly made screen, no. 6. Treasure number: South Section 179. Courtesy of the Shosoin Treasure House, Nara, Japan. Photograph printed by Benrido.
While the two textiles cannot be matched with extant pieces from good Central Asian or Sasanian contexts, the motif of the hunter on horseback in the Parthian shot pose is known from royal Sasanian gilt silver plates, and it is assumed that the pieces are translations of Persian originals made by Tang weavers (Hayashi 1975: 126–128, figs. 13, 82). This seems to be confirmed for the Hōryu-ji fragment since the horses have Chinese characters for “good fortune” and “mountain” embroidered on their flanks.

The question of the origins of these designs and motifs is problematic. Though the resemblance of the single unit of hunter and quarry seems to be borrowed from Sasanian silver plates, none of the extant Persian plates show such compositions with four hunters. There are plates with bilateral symmetry in the image (Harper 1965: fig. 1; Hayashi 1975: fig. 132; Gunter and Jett 1992: no. 17) and a few elliptical bowls decorated with several discrete units arranged around a central feature (Gunter and Jett 1992: no. 28), but there are no examples of four units presented with equal importance in a quadripartite format.

The actual motif has no direct parallels in extant Sasanian or Central Asian objects. The motif of the hunter in Parthian shot pose is well known from royal Sasanian gilt silver plates. (Marshak 1986: fig. 1; Harper 1978: nos. 3, 6), but the image is a single hunter with animals. Moreover, this had become
an exclusively royal image from the reign of Shapur II (309–379) forward, though examples from the third and early fourth century may actually represent local princes (Harper 1978: no. 3). While not always the case, it is sometimes possible to link the hunter with a particular king because of the specificity of the crown being worn, though this becomes more difficult with plates produced in the sixth and early seventh centuries (Harper 1978: 26 and no. 6). Most likely, if a silver plate does lie behind the image of the hunter on the two textiles, it would have been one of royal production. These were probably produced in limited quantities in royal workshops at Ctesiphon to be used as gifts from the king to selected nobles to secure or reward loyalty, or in diplomatic settings to give visual strength to alliances made with foreign rulers, often of nomadic groups, in the northern border regions (Harper 1978: 26). Almost all the extant plates with some notion of original provenience come from the steppe region of southern Russia.

The hunting motif had a long history in Mesopotamia and had acquired renewed vigor in Sasanian royal iconography after Shapur II. While the older Achaemenid treatment had stressed a more static composition, with the king and animal placed facing one another on either side of the axis, the Sasanian compositions were active, often using the contortion of the Parthian shot pose to emphasize the king's martial and equestrian abilities and perhaps his Persianness (Rostovtzeff 1943). The king is always shown in royal garb, including chest halter with a central boss, and a crown; he is fully armed with sword, quiver, and hunting weapon, most commonly a bow. The representations must have operated on a couple of levels, certainly as a reference to the warrior capabilities of the ideal king and perhaps also to the older Mesopotamian and Achaemenid concept of the ruler as the bringer of order to the chaos presented by the natural world. Such images would fit easily into the nomadic culture on the border region, where the gilded silver plates spoke the visual language of the successful hunt by the courageous and strong ruler, while the vessel itself could function in a banquet setting (Marshak 2004: 47). Such an interpretation is suggested by Faustus of Byzantium's description of the wine cup that Shapur commissioned, showing the portrait of the Armenian king mounted on a white horse, which he set before himself on festival occasions. 23 A silver plate that entered the steppe

area as a diplomatic gift might eventually have ended up in a Chinese court setting, especially during the period of the nomadic control of northern China, until its reunification under the Sui (581–618 CE).

It could well have been in Luoyang, the capital of the Northern Wei dynasty, that the Sasanian prototype was reconceived as a textile design. The finds of a Sasanian glass cup, ring, and gilt silver ewer with classicizing figural forms in the mid-sixth-century CE tomb of Li Xian and his wife in Guyuan, Ningxia (Dien 2002: 63–64, entries 30, 31, 32), show that members of the elites during the period of the Six Dynasties had access to high-value western products that could have been sources of new motifs. Hunting scenes have been found on woven silk textiles of the Wei period, though these do not resemble the compositions of either the Sasanian plates or of the Shōsōin or Hōryū-ji pieces (Li Wenying 2012A: 164, figs. 3.51a–c). By the time of the Northern Dynasties, motives of animals facing each other, bilaterally arranged and framed by a pearl roundel, turn up on Chinese polychrome jin textiles, and some of these have several pairs of facing animals arranged along the central axis (Li Wenying 2012B: 196–197, fig. 4.28, 4.29b). This suggests that Chinese weavers were playing with the western-derived motifs.

However, two other locations seem more likely for the production of the Shōsōin and Hōryū-ji silks. There has developed a consensus among textile scholars of the Silk Road that Turfan was a major center for textile production and innovation during the period of the Kao-ch’ang kingdom (442–640 CE) and particularly during the rule of the Ch’ü kings (502–640 CE) established by Ch’ü Chia. Angela Sheng (1998) has argued that during this period there was an influx of Sogdians, farmers, merchants, and crafts-people into the oasis city. It could be that these Sogdians brought Sasanian motifs with them, because Sogdian artisans were known to have borrowed from Sasanian forms. Sogdian weavers interacted with the resident Han weavers, learning new weaving techniques and influencing the Chinese weavers as well. Sogdian merchants patronized Sogdian weavers, encouraging them to develop weaving techniques and designs in part borrowed from their Han counterparts, and this encouragement resulted in the production of a distinctive group of textiles. None of the items from this group at all relate to the Shōsōin and Hōryū-ji pieces, but there is the very strong possibility that the stimulating environment within the weaving communities of Turfan could have provided the proper setting for the transformation of a western form into a Chinese product.

Fragments of four cloth facial coverings from funerary contexts in the Astana cemetery near
Turfan look similar to the Shōsōin and Hōryū-ji silks. These are fragments of horseman textiles, three preserving only a portion of a single figure within a bit of the pearl roundel, and the fourth the actual image of the full horseman in Parthian shot pose. They are all samits as well, and so clearly relate to the Shōsōin and Hōryū-ji pieces in both motif and weave. They were all found used as face covers for the deceased, and two can be dated: 59TAM337:15 to 657 CE and 60TAM322:22/I to 663 CE. Kazuko identifies these as Chinese samits (Kazuko 2006: 163–165, figs. 114 and 115). One of the mid-seventh-century inventories found at Turfan that record the grave goods deposited with the deceased (Tang Zhuanghui) includes the mention of a face cover made of Persian brocade, which could refer to something similar to the horsemen textiles (Liu 2012: 1115). The great Tang traveler, the monk Xuanzang, praised the quality of the artisanal output of the Sogdians in Samarkand: “its skillful craftsmen are the best among various countries” (Fascicle I: 871c; Li Rongxi 1996: 29), and so there is reason to believe that even non-Sogdians might have patronized weavers, Sogdian or Chinese, who produced work with Sogdian-inspired themes.

However, there is an alternative location for the production specifically of these textiles with symmetrically arranged figures within a roundel and modified western motifs. Wu Min (2006: 234–242), using two ancient literary sources, has argued that the pearl roundel enclosing symmetrically arranged paired animals, but produced in a warp-faced compound-woven silk, was a form invented in workshops in ancient Shu Prefecture (Sichuan) in the area of modern Chengdu. The Tang dynasty author Zhang Yanyuan recorded in his Lidai minghua (Records of Famous Paintings through the Ages) the story of Dou Shilun. In the early Tang period, Dou Shilun was placed in charge of the public works in Yizhou (Sichuan), and in this role he oversaw the production of patterned jin silks and palace ling silks, for which he introduced designs of paired animals. These became famous for their resplendent qualities and were received at court, where they were placed into the imperial storerooms. Dou Shilun was given the honorable title of the Duke of Lingyang, and the designs came to be referred to as lingyang. So, according to this account, by the mid-seventh century CE, weaving workshops in Shu

Prefecture were manufacturing a particular type of silk warp-faced textile with a distinctive motif of paired animals.

A story from *Beishi* (History of the Northern Dynasties), also set in Shu Prefecture but slightly earlier, supplies the probable source for these motifs. The Sui emperor Wendi ordered He Chou to create silks that imitated Persian silks. His imitations surpassed the real Persian silks that arrived as tribute to the Chinese court. He may himself have been of Sogdian origin. His grandfather was already in charge of silks for King Wuling (r. 552–553) of the Liang dynasty, who had earlier been the prefect of Yizhou (537–552). It seems that a Sogdian community existed in Yizhou during the Liang dynasty that may have re-established itself at Chengdu in the Sui dynasty and begun to produce silks with Persian motifs to suit the demands of the court, though the warp-faced weave suggests that the weavers were more likely Chinese. The finds in Astana could have been brought to the site rather than being locally produced (Wu Min 2006: 234–242). However, the Astana pieces along with the Shōsōin and Hōryū-ji silks are *samits*, weft-faced twills, and it was in Turfan that both weaving traditions were actively pursued (Sheng 2006: 120–122). It is certainly possible that Chengdu silks made their way to Turfan where the local Sogdian weavers reproduced them but using the western *samit* technique, which would have been also the case for the supposed Persian prototypes.

Woven silks with paired hunter images on either side of an axis have been found in European churches where the fabrics were originally used to wrap relics. Some of the hunters, but not all, are represented in the Parthian shot pose (Muthesius 1997: figs. 21B, 25A, 25B, 76B, 77A, 79B, 82B, 90A). Most of these fragmentary textiles are treated as Middle Byzantine works copying Sasanian prototypes that entered western Europe during the Ottonian period as part of diplomatic marriages. Two, however, have been identified as Sasanian originals (Muthesius 1997: 68–72), one fragment in the Germanisches Nationalmuseum, Nürnberg, and the other in Saint Ursula’s church in Cologne (Muthesius 1997: pl. 80A). The specific places of origin for these pieces cannot be located with any certainty, but the hunters appear to be wearing royal Sasanian crowns, a feature absent in other hunter silks from Europe.

The Byzantine reworkings and possible Sasanian originals suggest an alternative vehicle for the transmission of the motif to China: an actual Sasanian textile. However, a consideration of representations of Sasanian textiles as preserved in Sasanian reliefs shows that only the very late
imperial series from Taq-i Bustan show court figures dressed in costumes with animals placed within roundels. Much more abundant are the images of figures dressed in caftans decorated with animals inside roundels from the Sogdian site of Afrasiab (ancient Samarkand). These figures decorate a painting from the Hall of the Ambassadors, a painting dated to the mid-seventh century CE. What survives of the representations of clothing decorated with roundels and animals has nothing as sophisticated as the four-figured designs for the Shōsōin and Horyu-ji fragments, but the general compositional forms seem clearly to have been in use in Sogdiana in the mid-seventh century (Raspopva 2006: 65–66). It may well have been from there rather than from Sasanian Iran that the motif was carried east to China and eventually to Japan.

Equally interesting is the question of what type of fabric carried such patterns. So far as evidence can be found in relief carvings, silver gilt plates, Sogdian paintings, and surviving textiles from the Caucasus site of Moščevaja Balka (Jerusalimskaja and Borkopp 1996: no. 1), only clothing — caftans and coats — is decorated with this type of subject matter encircled in a pearl roundel. If the observation conveys the reality, then it is worth considering how such a patterned garment would have arrived in China, much less Japan. There is minimal evidence that Central Asian or Sasanian court attire had any popularity in the far East. A possible means of transmission was as a fragment. It has been noted that among the finds from Moščevaja Balka, many are in a fragmentary state and were used to decorate other garments. There is good reason to believe that silk textiles were chopped down and used as payment for services (Knauer 2001: 131), and so it is not impossible that a Sogdian court caftan in the possession of a Sogdian merchant, perhaps a high ranking noble or prince in Sogdiana, was cut up in order to make payments for local services on a trading venture to China. Such a practice would have resulted in the separation of a single or a group of pearl roundel units from the larger garment and would have provided the Chinese weaving workshop with the prototype needed to produce the examples preserved in the Shōsōin. This might well explain how the hunting motif with the horseman in Parthian shot pose actually entered China and Japan, where it became popular as a decorative motif for silver work, as we have seen, for tomb mural painting (Wu-yung tomb, T’ung-kou, Kirin Province Koguryo, Korea; Hayashi 1975: fig. 139; Kim 2007: 45–53), and for textiles.

What seems clear is that whatever prototype, silver plate or silk robe, brought the royal hunting motif to China, the transformation was dramatic in the case of the two Japanese examples.
Not only was the single image reworked into four-part compositions, but it was substantially enlarged to the point that neither the Shōsōin nor the Hōryū-ji fragments could have been parts of larger repeated image compositions used for robes. They must have had quite new functions. As Kazuko reconstructs it, the Hōryū-ji piece was part of a composition of five rows of repeated medallions, three medallions per row, and, moreover, it was known as the banner of the Emperor Shōmu (Kazuko 2006: 155–156, fig. 4). The three face coverings from the Astana cemetery possibly were produced to serve in a funerary context, though it is not clear from their fragmentary condition whether they were originally a single medallion or cut down from something larger. The Shōsōin and Hōryū-ji silks were clearly not found in a funerary context, and that may well reflect a Japanese change in function. They both could have served as banners, though the Shōsōin fragment, when complete, could have also operated as a covering for something of importance.

Li Wenying has observed that the movement of the motif of paired animal images encircled by a pearl roundel from Sasanian work into Chinese work parallels the increased importance of Buddhism in China during the Northern Dynasties. Animals are considered to be intelligent and to have equal value to humans in Buddhism, and these Chinese polychrome jīn textiles with facing animals encircled by pearl roundels must have functioned within a Buddhist context. Individual silk units such as these could have been used as elements for a patched robe for an eminent Buddhist monk. Such a patched robe (kāsāya) is known from the Stein collection of Dunhuang finds in the British Museum.25 By the Asuka period (645–710 CE) in Japan the horsemen had assumed the role of the state guardians to Buddhist deities called the Four-Heavenly-Kings (Kazuko 2006: 155). It is reasonable to think that the motif, in the form of a textile piece with a repeated medallion, might have been carried back to Japan in the luggage of a Japanese monk who had come to China with one of the many religious groups that sought instruction in the Buddhist monasteries in China (Li Wenying 2012B: 198), where it was presented to the emperor and eventually deposited in the Shōsōin.

Textiles are by far the best known category of objects held in the Shōsōin, and they are also among the most problematic. Over the centuries collections of artifacts from other temples have been added to the initial deposit of the empress Komyo, and chief among these are textiles. Perhaps the

25 Whitfield and Farrer 1990: no. 89.
most significant addition was of textiles from the Hōryu-ji, Japan's oldest Buddhist temple, dating to the seventh century CE. Therefore it is assumed that some of the textiles are equally early in date (Kennedy 1996: 149) and so actually belong to the last phase of the Sasanian Empire and during the period when Tang China still controlled parts of Xinjiang. By the seventeenth century the records indicate that the textiles themselves had begun to disintegrate, and many were listed only as fragments of scraps, resulting in a collection today of about two hundred thousand pieces (Ogata 2012: 1, 9). Of the textile donations made by the empress, only a few fragments can be matched to descriptions in the Kokka Chimpo-cho. The textiles themselves include furniture coverings, wrappings, rugs, dance costume elements, ceremonial dress, and banners (Shepherd 1955: 124).

Kasens, felt rugs, are mentioned in the list of the dowager empress's donations in 758, though none of the thirty-plus extant kasens match the descriptions. A notation made in the Record of Screen and Flower-patterned Felt Rugs for July 26, 756, records that a patterned felt rug and a pair of brocade footwear were among the objects dedicated to the Great Buddha (Ogata 2012: 9), and so the rugs were clearly appropriate in Buddhist ritual settings. But the actual examples in the Shōsōin may have come from China or more likely Korea, according to Matsumoto, because some of them are labelled “of the Unified Silla Dynasty” (1984: 203, 239, nos. 111, 112, 113). Felted floor coverings represent an important textile technique from Central Asia, where it was particularly popular in the nomadic cultures of the north, and dates back to at least the first millennium BCE (Rubinson 1990: 57. Griaznov 1958: 21). These examples in the Shōsōin could have been of Japanese manufacture, though there is little evidence for sheep raising and wool working in early Japan, and it is just as likely that they came to Japan as some type of foreign item to the emperor from the west.

The felting process takes advantage of a naturally occurring feature of many wool fibers which when agitated while wet will lock together in a permanent manner to form a non-woven textile

26 Items are still being added, though these are carefully catalogued to prevent confusion (Nara National Museum 2011: 5).

27 Today the textiles are stored in climate-controlled ferro-concrete structures, the East and West Treasure Repositories constructed in 1953 and 1962 respectively (Ogata 2012: 10).

28 Eleven felt rugs are on view on the web page, all listed as treasure number North Section 150. They can be seen on pp. 4–5 of the textile category on shosoin.kunaicho.go.jp/en-US.
This is a mechanical, rather than chemical, bonding process and results in a tough fabric that will not be damaged by subsequent wetting (Barber 1991: 215). To create the kasens in the Shōsōin, colored wool was inserted into a neutral ground and then strong pressure and agitation were applied to make the wool fibers bind to one another. Most likely, in the case of the Shōsōin pieces, the colored wool was laid out first on a mat and then the ground wool was laid atop the pattern. The mat would then be rolled up tightly and tied, to compress the wool and apply pressure. Water and even soap could be introduced to encourage the felting process (Burkett 1979: 3–4).

The origins of felting may go back to the Neolithic age. The site of Çatal Hüyük in southern Turkey has yielded painted images dating to the seventh millennium BCE that are argued to represent felted forms (Burkett 1979: 8–9). However, the earliest piece of felt found in an archaeological context is from the Early Bronze Age II sanctuary floor at Beycesultan in Anatolia, and this may well indicate an Early Bronze Age date for the beginning of the exploitation of the natural process of felting that occurs in some types of wool (Barber 1991: 217, 222). The full potential of felt cloth for use in clothing, saddle covers, furnishings and the construction of shelter was only realized among the nomadic peoples of the Central Asian steppes. Two felt rugs were found in the tombs at Noin-Ula (Mongolia), which date to the first century CE (Burkett 1977: 111–112). Herodotus (4.46, 114, 124) records that Scythians were already living in carts perhaps draped with felt as protection against the elements, an early form of ghir. Dated to 3100 BCE from the Yamnaya horizon are the remains of a wagon with a reed mat covering perhaps backed with felt, used to protect the passengers, unearthed from kurgan 1 at Lukyanova on the west side of the Dnieper (Anthony 2007: 312). By the sixth century CE, some Central Asian peoples were clearly living in felt houses. The Buddhist monks Song Yun and Huisheng recorded observing such dwellings among the Yeda peoples in what is now northern Afghanistan in their journey south in 547 CE (Liu 2012: 108).

Felt used as a medium for expressing complex visual ideas is first seen in the surviving felt paintings on saddle covers from the tombs at Pazyryk in the Altai Mountains dated to the fifth-fourth centuries BCE (Rudenko 1970: 229–238; Burkett 1979: 9–13). It has been suggested recently, based on analyses of the pigments used, that the pieces may have been manufactured further west, since the

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29 A manner of working that I noted still being used in a village in Turkmenistan.
dye sources were not available locally (Polosmak and Barkova 2005: 105–164, 229), although it is equally possible that the dyes rather than the finished products moved from west to east.

Central Asia had developed a rich tradition of felt art used in a variety of settings by the middle of the first millennium BCE, and the appeal of the material had also spread to China. The Chinese sources already referred to the steppe lands as the “land of felt” in the fourth century BCE (Burkett 1979: 21; 1977: 111), and the Chinese had begun to employ felt for armor in the third century BCE (Burkett 1979: 18). The Han Chinese may have been using felt pads as mattresses as early as the late Zhou (fourth century BCE) (Laufer 1930: 3), but they do not seem to have fully exploited wool fibers even though they had domesticated sheep. Felt may have become a more common element in Chinese court life and ritual with the arrival of the Northern Wei, whose origins were nomadic (Laufer 1930: 4–5). Certainly the kasens with the large floral medallions, which have come to be known since the early twentieth century as kara-hana or Chinese flower in Japan, must be of Chinese origin, since to date similar patterns are known from objects of more westerly origin (Matsumoto 1984: 218).

Nomadic peoples who moved into settled areas of the Taklimakan and adopted sedentary life styles probably brought with them the techniques of felt-making. The nomadic Saka people had settled in the region and in due time formed the Khotan kingdom that came to dominate the region in the middle of the first millennium CE. Felt production became an important craft in the area (Rong 2004: 26). Donation inventories from Dunhuang, dating from the Tibetan period (786–848 CE), list Khotanese embroidered felt as being given to the monasteries (Rong 2004: 22). It was clearly regarded as an appropriate donation to a Buddhist monastic center.

It is possible that the felt kasens in the Shōsōin came east with Chinese Buddhist monks and temple personnel who came to Japan to staff the new monasteries. When the Japanese monk Ennin was deported from China to Japan during the great purge of Buddhism in the mid-ninth century, he received a gift of two felt hats from one of his Chinese patrons (Reischauer 1955: 260), and so we know that felt products were in use among Buddhist monks. There are paintings from Dunhuang showing monks seated on mats, possibly felt rugs.30 The rugs could have originally been Khotanese felt given to Chinese Buddhist monasteries that were then regifted to Japan, perhaps sent with Japanese monks

returning home from extended stays in Chinese monasteries. Chinese monks could have brought them as they headed to Japan. Several of these achieved renown in Tempyo Japan. Jianzhen (Ganjin in Japanese; 688–763 CE) officiated at the rites to celebrate the completion of the Kaidan-in (Ordination Pavilion) and Daoxuan (Dosen in Japanese; 702–760 CE) led the eye-opening ceremony for the Great Buddha of the Todai-ji (Hayashi 1975: 54, 67–68). Since textiles formed a feature in most Buddhist rituals there was always a need for them. They could also have entered through Korea, because Buddhism was established in the Silla kingdom, which had its own nomadic associations.

A similar situation may explain the *joku* with lions. A *joku* is a padded textile with a decorative woven top and plain bottom stuffed with silk wadding. It was used horizontally, laid atop a flat surface to provide an appropriate stage for the presentation of treasured objects. This *joku* functioned in a completely Japanese manner, but the image is not Japanese. This is a weft-faced twill damask weave (woven with six shafts) of silk (Kazuko 2006: 171) with a one-directional pattern that operates against the function and has been cut in mid-repeat, lessening the impact of the subject matter. Since there are two examples it would seem that one bolt of cloth was chopped down to make two or more pads. The subject is two lions with semi-nude keepers on either side of a central tree, perhaps a date palm. The heraldic compositional structure, the motives of lions and keepers, and the semi-nude treatment of the figures are unlike anything Japanese or Chinese. Although Kazuko argues that it is a Chinese product (Kazuko 2006: 171–172), the origin of the cloth is usually assumed to be western (Kennedy 1996: 158; contra Nara National Museum 2010: no. 23). If it was woven in a western workshop, it must have arrived in Japan as a bolt of cloth over two meters in length. It was clearly produced to be a decorative textile since the pattern is too large to have served for clothing and is repeated in a manner that would have made it difficult to cut down. A few decorative textiles with large patterns intended to serve as wall hangings or curtains do survive from eastern Mediterranean contexts (Shepherd 1976), but none has any subject or composition comparable to that shown on the *joku*. The semi-nude figures of the keepers along with the somewhat realistic treatment of the lions do

31 Treasure number South Section 150. Can be seen on p. 24 of the textile category on shosoin.kunaicho.go.jp/en-US. Hayashi 1975: fig. 27.

32 Kazuko thinks that the motif recalls early Islamic patterns from Baghdad, but he identifies the work as from a Chinese workshop, 2006: 171.
seem to argue for a western source, but from what place remains difficult to identify. One can only assume that the merchant carrying the textile bolt knew that its value probably resided in keeping the bolt whole, allowing the purchaser to cut the cloth to purpose.

That the heraldic compositional device found a home in Japan seems clear from the stencil-dyed panels found on one of the one hundred folding screens that the empress donated. It shows deer facing each other on either side of a central tree, and it was created using a technique of doubling the cloth and placing it between two blocks with the same image colored in dye. The motif of the central tree is known from Sasanian gilt silver plates (Hayashi 1975: 119–121; Kennedy 1996: 154–155, fig. 7) as well as perhaps from textiles like the joku. It had a longer life in Mesopotamia and ultimately derived from the concept of the sacred tree. The technique was also of Central Asian or Indian origin (Noguchi 1941: 32), though it was already being used by Chinese dyers by the eighth century CE (Whitfield and Farrer 1990: no. 110). However, both motif and technique clearly operated comfortably in the Japanese setting, as seen in the deer panel.

ITEMS FOR DANCE AND MUSIC

The gigaku mask of the “Drunken Persian King”34 was very much a part of Japanese court art of the Tempyo period, but it was of foreign origin, a fact that was known at the time. According to legend gigaku was a ritual dance form introduced into Japan from China in 612 CE by a Korean monk (Milliken 1950, 176; Jenyns 1952: 52). The prototype for the masked dance may have originated in Kashgar, since the drum used in the dance is similar to the Kashgari drum (Jenyns 1952: 51). It was said to have first appeared in China in the state of Wu and the region south of the Yangtze, but masked dances are known to have been popular at the Central Asian city of Kucha, famous for its Buddhist grottos, and it could have been from there that the dance form spread to the Tang court, perhaps along with Buddhist monks. The poet Bai Juyi (772–846 CE) described a troop of masked dancers performing a version of the lion dance with two featured participants, one in the mask of the lion and

33 Treasure number 44. It can be seen on p. 2 of the textile category on shosoin.kunaicho.go.jp/en-US. Hayashi 1975: fig. 130.
34 Treasure number South Section 1. It can be seen on p. 7 of the textile category on shosoin.kunaicho.go.jp/en-US. Hayashi 1975, fig. 85.
the other in the mask of a foreign barbarian, a Tartar; they could well have been performing the
Central Asian form of *gigaku* (Hayashi 1975: 103).35

In Japan *gigaku* was initially part of Buddhist ceremonies. The dancers with their comic and
sometimes vulgar masks and gestures, were elements in the opening portion of outdoor Buddhist
rituals (Milliken 1950: 177; Jenyns 1952: 51). Masked *gigaku* performers were present at the eye-opening
ceremony at the Todai-ji, and may well have been a group of Central Asian performers who had
taveled to Nara for this important event. The 164 masks in the Shōsōin, include forty-nine
representing faces, some clearly intended to reference Central Asians and Indians through the
exaggeration of certain features.36 This artistic treatment of foreigners was a feature of Tang style and
is often seen in the renderings of western merchants shown on camelback. As the Japanese integrated
the dance into their Buddhist practices, they maintained the Central Asian masking tradition and
Chinese visual representation of the western foreigner.

The music played at the Japanese court had taken form in the Tang court at Chang’an, and the
instruments employed were those of Chinese musicians (Clark 2005: 47). However, Tang court music
was much indebted to Central Asia, from which several instruments derived and probably also
musical types (Clark 2005: 15–17; Hayashi 1975: 96–97). Western forms had begun to enter China
during the previous Sui dynasty, perhaps from the resident Sogdian communities (Juliano and Learner
2002a: 295–303, entry no. 107), but the new dynasty, according to the Grand Astrologer, Fu I, was
expected to establish its own calendar, colors for court dress, code of laws, names for bureaucratic
offices, rituals, and associated music (Wechsler 1985: 6–7), which might explain how the western
elements became part of the court setting.

35 “History of the Lion Dance,” dancelessons.net/dancehistory. The poem is most frequently translated as "Western Liang
Arts"; though in his study and translation of the poem, J. A. Gwyther offers an alternative title: “The Actor of Xiliang

36 All the masks are grouped together under Treasure number South Section 1, pp. 2–11 musical instruments category, on
shosoin.kunaicho.go.jp/en-US. Hayashi 1975, fig. 85.
In the Shōsōin there is a biwa (Fig. 5),\textsuperscript{37} perhaps the one played by Emperor Shōmu himself (Hayashi 1975: 51–52, figs. 28, 44, 45). It was a version of the Chinese p’i-p’a (Clark 2005: 51), which was in turn a form of the Persian pear-shaped lute, the barbat, though Hayashi identifies this biwa as the only surviving example of an Indian style lute (Hayashi 1975: 98). The plectrum guard is decorated with the image of a Central Asian man, identified, not by facial exaggeration as in the gigaku mask, but rather by his position atop a Bactrian camel and his non-Japanese, non-Chinese garb, which might be read as a clear statement of recognition of the ultimate source of the instrument. Along with the biwa, the Shōsōin has an example of a narrow-waist drum in ceramic.\textsuperscript{38} Narrow-waist or hour-glass shaped drums have a long history in China but appear to have been pushed to the fringes by the first millennium BCE. However, the form may well have migrated quite far west, to the Hittite region of Beycesultan in Anatolia, where remains have been found in the archeological record. They appear to have been reintroduced into China as elements in Buddhist orchestras during the Sui and Tang periods (Lawergren 2002: 115–120), and from there the form was perhaps carried with Buddhist monks to Japan.

\textsuperscript{37} Treasure number North Section 29. Five string biwa lute of shitan with mother-of-pearl inlay. Other views can be seen on p. 12 musical instruments category on shosoin.kunaicho.go.jp/en-US. Hayashi 1975: figs. 28 and 44.

\textsuperscript{38} Treasure number South Section 114. Can be seen on p. 12 of musical instruments category on shosoin.kunaicho.go.jp/en-US Hayashi 1975: fig. 105.
**Figure 5.** Five-string *biwa* lute of *shitan* with mother-of-pearl inlay. Treasure number: North Section 29. Courtesy of the Shosoin Treasure House, Nara, Japan. Photograph printed by Benrido.
CONCLUSIONS

As the poet and scholar Yone Noguchi, the father of the sculptor Isamu Noguchi, represents him, Emperor Shōmu was a patron of the arts and a careful collector of things from outside Japan, mostly from China (Noguchi 1941: 29–114). His patronage resulted in court artists having at their disposal fine exotic objects as well as excellent examples of domestic art from which to draw inspiration. Most of
the foreign goods must have entered Japan through a prior screening process in China and Korea; they
must have come largely as diplomatic gifts, sometimes regifted exotic items such as can be found in
more recent examples of diplomatic gifts, 39 or as part of the belongings of Chinese Buddhist monks to
be donated to the Japanese temples in which they were to serve or accompanying returning Japanese
monks. 40 However they came, they still offer significant insight into the types of items that were
circulating from the far west and Central Asia into the far east.

It seems that prior to the mid-seventh century, there was little that was truly Sasanian. 41 What
entered was most likely of Sogdian production, perhaps emulating certain Sasanian features. Only
with the fall of the Sasanian Empire and the subsequent easterly escape of the Sasanian court along
with some of its court artists, did truly Sasanian works begin to appear. What is perhaps of equal
importance is that, based on the Chinese records of trade caravans, there is little evidence that these
high value items were among the goods being brought for commercial exchange. Perhaps these were
hidden because of their potential value, or perhaps they were treated differently, especially if they
were not intended for sale but rather for giving to or even as tribute to the Tang court.

Japan was a passive player in the development of the economic exchange of the Silk Roads.
There is nothing to suggest that objects were specifically crafted for a Japanese consumer, for example,
as a gift or as tribute or as an item for Buddhist ritual use in Japan, by artists outside of the islands. The
objects that made it into the Shōsōin collection had been brought to Japan for reasons other than
outright economic gain. Japan did not begin to actively participate in the private economic system
until the ninth century CE, when first private Korean and subsequently Chinese merchants brought
Japan into the emerging maritime economic network of East Asia (Verschuer 1999: 5. Guy 2010: 10–27).
Until that time, Japan was not directly engaged in major trade with East Asia. During the Nara period
Japan had a well-developed domestic trade structure with several nodal points that brought together

39 An example is the decorated drinking horn of Persian manufacture that featured in a group of diplomatic gifts from a
Netherlandish Embassy to Tsar Alexei Mikhailovich in the mid-seventeenth century. Zagorodnyaya 2002: 36, fig. 16.
40 The Japanese monk Ennin was loaded down with gifts by his Chinese patrons and friends when he was deported from
41 This is how the ewer in the Tomb of Li Xian is commonly treated. Juliano and Lerner 2002a: entry 31.
resources from throughout the archipelago, and low-level government officials were engaged in sanctioned trade activities (Farris 1998: 320; Holcombe 1999: 280). Some foreign goods must have entered via commercial trade rather than through diplomatic or religious channels. The provincial capital at Suō had its docks on Tatara Beach, which connected the provincial capital to the Asian mainland, and the docks were next to the market, which was in turn linked to the Inland Sea via a canal on its southern end (Farris 1998: 310). This arrangement would have permitted exotic items to be brought back to Japan from the mainland to enter the Japanese domestic trade system. Moreover, there was a growing immigrant population in Japan that had ties to Buddhism and may well have been connected to the emerging maritime trade in southern China on a personal or private basis (Holcombe 1999: 288–291).

Most exotic items arrived on the archipelago via diplomatic or religious channels, and thus the Japanese market played no role in the formation of objects in China, Korea, or Central Asia. For the most part, what was of foreign origin in Japan that was considered to be of value must have acquired significance through association, either from connections to the Tang court or to Buddhist monasteries and Buddhist rituals. It may have been the awareness of this aspect that dictated what the Chinese and Korean courts sent to Japan as part of diplomatic delegations. This was a gift-giving structure rather than a commercial exchange, and so what was chosen to be sent to the court at Nara was influenced by an awareness that some degree of affiliation with the Chinese or Korean court would give an object greater meaning in the Japanese court setting, just as items with close ties to Buddhist centers and rituals were of greater value in Tempyo Japan.

The Shōsōin collection allows for a process of categorization that is rarely possible in studies of ancient art. None of these objects appear to have had intrinsic value because of the materials, except perhaps for the glass. Neither the Chinese nor the Koreans nor the Japanese seem to have been producing blown glass with its translucent qualities, and so the product itself may have had value. Clearly this value was increased because of the way in which such glass objects fit within Buddhist rituals. There was a second way in which glass cups along with metal cups acquired value beyond the materials themselves: the fact that the Chinese court had taken to using certain types of Central Asian cups, whether from Central Asia or inspired by those designs, in certain drinking settings. Silver vessels, while not of intrinsic value in China, could acquire value through the use of silver in the sapta-
ratna Buddhist system, which would have made them suitable as gifts to the Japanese court. It should not be overlooked that the spread of Buddhism itself fostered international trade, in order to obtain things needed for rituals (Holcomb 1999: 281). While Chinese and Central Asian silk textiles and fibers were valued for themselves in the far west, at least until the Byzantine period, by the time these silks arrived in Japan, Japanese silk production was well established. There was nothing intrinsically valuable about the silk, and so something else made them significant enough to be included in the Treasury. It would seem that the motif of the four hunting horsemen had been incorporated, not just into Buddhism, but specifically into Japanese Buddhism. The felted kasens may have held some type of interest because of the technique, since the Japanese were not producing felt at the time, but it was no doubt the associations with practical aspects of Buddhist monastic rituals that gave the rugs importance.

In each of these cases, it was the way in which an original object’s material, form, motif, or technique were repurposed within a new cultural setting that gave the needed significance to a piece and made it suitable as something to be treasured. The material itself allowed for the glass to be worked into a new context; the style of a metal cup could be used in a newly developed drinking context; or the silver could be worked into the Buddhist system; the horsemen motif was assigned an iconographic role; and the kasens had a practical association with Buddhist ritual.

On the other hand, some of the items must have gained their importance only on arriving in Japan. The gigaku masks were made in Japan of modest materials but were probably all used in the inauguration of the great Buddha statue, and it was that event that gave them value, not their foreignness per se nor their materials nor technique of manufacture nor pre-Japanese context nor their particular motifs. The same may be true for the drum, but the biwa, with its interesting Central Asian association, probably acquired significance through its ownership by the emperor himself. The silk panels with heraldic designs, though modeled on foreign compositional prototypes, were also something used within the imperial household, and from that association gained their right to be included. At least one item, the joku with lions and keepers, must have been deposited simply as an example of pure exoticism, something that was unique and therefore valued.

Similar types of dynamics must have been at play in all of the centuries during which the Silk Roads operated. For the merchant, knowing which light and portable objects would return the
greatest price was essential for success. That is what is so striking about the objects in the collection: some, such as the faceted glass cup, were industrial products, of minimal value in their place of origin but of potential high value as they were moved east. Interestingly, the reverse may have occurred with the lobed drinking bowls. These are best known in their silver versions from their Persian homeland, but in the new eastern contexts they were produced in a cheaper metal or in glass. Most likely the Sasanian or Sogdian worlds did not influence the Chinese to pick up the lobed cups and the associated drinking practices, but rather it was the nomadic peoples, with whom the Chinese interacted and from whom they adapted a way to incorporate the cups into their lifestyle. It would have been the Chinese practice that gave the cups significance in Japanese court.

Something similar may have been at work with the initial prototypes for horsemen's silks. It is impossible to know for certain the prototype, possibly a Sasanian or Sogdian court robe brought east by a merchant or a fleeing member of the Sasanian court. This would have been an accidental encounter rather than the result of a merchant deliberately carrying the prototype east. An imperial mandate could lie behind the development of the woven form. The motif of an encircled hunter in Parthian shot pose survives in the medium of gilt silver bowls that might have inspired the new woven forms, but the setting of the exchange is difficult to determine. Or perhaps it was from a cut-down piece of silk fabric used as a payment that such a roundel image somehow ended up in the hands of a weaver. Whatever the original sources and vehicles of transmission, it appears in radically changed compositions and contexts. Finds from the Astana graves give an indication of the motif worked into a new function, as a funerary offering, perhaps because of its guardian aspect. It would seem that it was this guardian element that made it a viable item to offer to the Japanese court, as something with a newly discovered Buddhist meaning. And in Japan it was repurposed to serve as a banner rather than as a funerary gift.

Pirazzoli-t'Sersteven (1994: 23–26) has argued that to understand the ways in which objects moved along the Silk Roads at various moments in their long history, it is necessary to consider how receptive the receiving groups were to the foreign items, and in what aspects. Objects operated in different ways at different moments in time. Moreover, there were settings in which foreign objects could be integrated into an already established cultural system and given a new meaning and value, allowing the items to serve as the catalysts for new artistic inventions. That would seem to be the
situation for several of the objects in the Shōsōin that were easily worked into the Buddhist structure. The Japanese court’s desire for some presence in Tang China would explain why other items with strong Central Asian overtones that had become features in Chinese court life were also valued.

It seems clear that once some of these exotics became part of the imperial collection, they served to influence native artists. The fact that it is sometimes impossible to identify a work as a foreign piece or a Japanese response indicates the degree to which the outside forms became part of the Japanese repertoire of art types. These forms were then transformed again into truly Japanese works that served a Japanese taste and a Japanese need, such as the screens with heraldic animal compositions.

It is also worth considering what objects never made it to Japan, perhaps because they were seen by foreign courts or monasteries to be inappropriate for the Japanese or perhaps because they were just not present among the items being brought from western sources. There is little from the far west of the Mediterranean world except possibly for some glass vessels. There are neither Classical nor Byzantine items with clear Western motifs to be seen, and nothing from Central Asia inspired by these forms. Nothing unquestionably Sasanian, such as the gilt silver ewers and cups carrying relief sculpted figural forms, appears in the collection. There is no evidence that full Central Asian costumes were brought to Japan; for that matter, there are no undisputed Central Asian textile fragments that have been identified among the textile pieces.

Dien (2004:362–379) has treated this issue and has pointed out that during the Six Dynasties period Sasanian gilt silver objects, or objects in that style, were entering China. As has already been noted, the tomb of Li Xian and his wife has yielded an ewer with a classicizing scene. It was considered precious enough to become a funerary offering, and it must have graced his house as a piece of exotica, perhaps acquired when Li Xian was serving as governor in the northwest. The find of a silver gilt platter with Dionysiac imagery in Beitan township, Jingyuan county, Gansu (Julian and Lerner 2002a: entry 115), and dated to the second-third century CE suggests that there is more such material still to be found.42 Alas, the piece comes from an accidental find and so has no archaeological

42 Boardman 2015: 117–118, accepts the reading of the scenes on the ewer as episodes from the Trojan cycle and dates the silver platter to the first century CE.
context, though the fine condition of the work suggests that it too was part of a funerary hoard that somehow was robbed from context and then lost. Classically-inspired pieces and even Classical works, since the Dionysus platter is often argued to be of Eastern Mediterranean manufacture, were carried east in caravans, perhaps in the hope that the intrinsic value of the metal or the unusual images would make them desirable. The fact that some such objects were entering during the Six Dynasties might be simply because the nomadic rulers of China at that time found the exotic interesting and novel. Dien suggests that Li Xian was possibly of Xiongnu origin. However, these forms never seem to have made much of an impact either on their own or as a source for new forms, at least not enough to be worth the effort to carry lots of them overland, and so far they have not appeared in Sui or Tang contexts.

The Shōsōin collection gives a sense of the dynamic ways in which outside visual forms could enter into another culture and also hints at how they could be received. These included, for some objects, a place of honor perhaps but no future influence, for others a converted role to a new function within a new cultural context, and for still others a complete and total inclusion. It is this latter response that best explains the gigaku masks. The literary evidence makes it clear that the Japanese were never under the illusion that the gigaku dances were anything but foreign in origin, but they entered as part of Buddhist ritual, an acknowledged foreign religion, and were then incorporated into the court — at least until they were pushed aside by bugaku, an indigenous dance form (Jeyns 1955: 51). The masks preserved in the Shōsōin are of Japanese manufacture and must represent a Japanese response to this imported dance. Since nothing of the original dances or masks survived the collapse of Buddhism in Central Asia, it is impossible to know how closely the Japanese versions of the dance itself and masks associated with it replicate the prototypes, but it does not really matter. Clearly, Tempyo Japan was open to embracing and developing a foreign art form as its own.

These are the dynamics of the trade along the Silk Roads over a millennium of history. Different moments and different settings resulted in quite different receptions: sometimes objects passed through, sometimes they were accorded value within an existing system for a period of time, and in other instances they were transformed into cultural features of the receiving group. The Silk Roads trading system was constantly shifting, and when discussing its role in the distribution of ideas and influences, the nuances become important if a real understanding is to be gained.
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