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A silk kakemono (hanging scroll) painted in ink, colour, gold and kirikane (thinly cut gold

leaf) with a Shō Kannon seated in kekka fuza (lotus position) on a lotus pedestal raised on a four-legged dais, holding a renge (red lotus) in her left hand. The right hand is in segan-in mudra, the gesture of dispensing favours for the well-being of the world. The head is adorned with kebutsu crown at the base of a tall top-knot and she is wearing an elaborately decorated necklace and armlets.

Japan 16th century Muromachi period

Dimensions:

Scroll: H. 203cm x W. 100cm (80" x 39½")

Painting: H. 122.5cm x W. 80.5cm (48¼" x 31¾")

Shō Kannon is the Sacred Form of Kannon, the model for all forms of Kannon and represents the pure, noble, sacred and holy. Worship of this deity originated in India between the 1st and 2nd century AD. She is also considered as one of the Six Manifestations of Kannon who protect the six realms of karmic rebirth. In this role, Shō Kannon brings salvation to those in the hell realm.

In traditional Japanese Buddhist art and sculpture, Shō Kannon commonly holds a lotus in one hand while the other may either hold a vase or form the segan-inmudra. Another attribute is the kebutsu crown which contains a small image of Amida Buddha. The kebutsu symbolises Kannon's role as one of Amida's main attendants.

Kannon, Bodhisattva of mercy (Sanskrit: Avalokiteshvara), personifies compassion and is one of the most widely worshipped Buddhist divinities in Japan. The name Kannon, meaning 'watchful listening' is the shortened version of her original title, Kanzeon, meaning 'the one who constantly surveys the world listening for the sounds of suffering'.

According to Pure Land Buddhism the task of Kannon is to witness and listen to the prayers and cries of those in difficulty in the earthly realm and to help them achieve salvation. The Lotus Sutra teaches that one will be granted immediate salvation by intently reciting Kannon's name to ask her for guidance. The three major sutras of Pure Land Buddhism describe Kannon's descent to meet dying devotees as the principal attendant Bodhisattva of Amida Buddha, along with Seishi Bosatsu.

Veneration of Kannon began in Japan in the late 6th century, soon after Buddhism had been introduced by way of China and Korea. In painting and sculpture, the top of Kannon's crown is often adorned with a

small image of Amida (a kebutsu), symbolising Kannon's role as Amida's principal attendant. Kannon is one of the most popular modern deities in Japan's Pure Land sects and serves various functions including protecting the Six Realms of Karmic Rebirth, acting as patron of motherhood and children, and protecting the souls of aborted children.

Renge (lotus) is one of the most widely known symbols of Buddhism and denotes purity and enlightenment. In all Buddhist traditions, the deities are typically shown sitting or standing atop a lotus or holding a lotus. It is also a symbol of mercy and compassion and it is one of the most ancient attributes associated with Kannon.

The lotus flower, by reproducing from its own matrix, rather than in the soil, is also a symbol of spontaneous generation. And the lotus which serves as seat or throne for the Buddha indicates therefore, divine birth. The lotus grows in mud, yet rises immaculate to the surface of the water to bloom thus symbolising purity and perfection. Similarly the Buddha was born into this world but exists in a higher plain. As with the lotus, whose fruits are mature at the moment the flower blossoms, the Truth preached by Buddha immediately produces the fruit of enlightenment. The lotus signifies ontologically a solid base at the centre of the possibilities of existence, a birth and a manifestation which are produced essentially in the intelligible world and later also in the world of the senses; it signifies ethically the detachment particular to he who is in the world but who is not attached to it.

The lotus becomes by extension the symbol of summer, of fruitfulness, of strength, both spiritual and material. Tantrism makes of it the emblem of the feminine principle.

For a similar example from the Kamakura period in the collection of the Nezu museum, Tokyo see:

Catalogue of Selected Masterpieces from the Nezu Collections, Objects of Religious Art, 2001 p.76, pl.59





