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Sumitomo Foundation Grant Enables Conservation of VMFA's Earliest Buddhist Scroll Painting

Descent of the Amitabha Trinity to return to VMFA's Japanese gallery

RICHMOND, Virginia – The Virginia Museum of Fine Arts recently completed the restoration of an important Japanese hanging scroll, *Descent of the Amitabha Trinity* (Amida Triad), with the support of a \$20,930 grant from The Sumitomo Foundation of Tokyo, Japan. The Foundation, created to contribute to the betterment of human society, provides grants for the protection, preservation and restoration of cultural properties outside of Japan.



Descent of the Amitabha Trinity. Arthur and Margaret Glasgow Fund. Photo by Travis Fullerton © Virginia Museum of Fine Arts

The museum acquired *Descent of the Amitabha Trinity* in 1964 from Yamanaka & Co. in Kyoto, Japan. Due to the scroll's fragility and poor condition, VMFA has not been able to display it for decades. With the extensive conservation treatment and remounting completed by experts from Nishio Conservation Studio in Washington, D.C., led by Yoshi Nishio, founder, president and conservator, *Descent of the Amitabha Trinity* will be reinstalled in the museum's Japanese Gallery in early 2019.

Descent of the Amitabha Trinity is the first painting among nearly sixty Japanese Buddhist artworks that came into VMFA's collection in the 1960s. It is also VMFA's earliest Buddhist painting and is the most significant Pure Land painting in the museum's collection. The painting is a visual depiction of Pure Land Buddhism and the strong impact the belief held over people's daily lives during the Nanbokucho period (1336-1392 AD).

The painting depicts Amitabha descending from heaven to greet the souls of devotees as they came to the Pure Land. The painting is executed in gold dust and decorated in the cut gold (*kirikane*) technique, where thin gold foil is cut into hairline strips before being applied to the silk to define details of the costumes. As Pure Land Buddhism spread throughout Japan, the image of the descent of the Amida Triad became popular, with devotees praying for rebirth in the Pure Land before such paintings.

"The painting not only visually illustrates the Pure Land teaching, but also reflects its strong impact on people's spiritual lives in 14th-century Japan," says

Li Jian, VMFA's E. Rhodes and Leona B. Carpenter curator of East Asian art. "One of the unique features of the painting is the portrait of a female patron sitting with a child under the eaves of the house, watching the descent of the deities." Stephen Bonadies, VMFA's senior deputy director for conservation and collections, says, "I am grateful to scholars from Japan and the United States for their recommendation letters, to conservators for their treatments of this valuable painting, and to The Sumitomo Foundation for its generous support."

The extensive restoration of the scroll took nearly one year and included major conservation treatments and remounting on silk brocade. After the painted silk scroll was gently cleaned, it was disassembled to remove the mounting fabrics and paper lining. Three layers of new, handmade Japanese paper were used to reline the scroll, which had become stiff due to heavy paste that was applied during a previous remounting. After it was remounted on new silk brocade (the original brocades could not be saved), new infills and patches were painted. The restoration also included the installation of new cords and fixtures for support, and a new Japanese handcrafted scroll box and rolling rod were commissioned to provide a stable storage environment for the painting.

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The Virginia Museum of Fine Arts in Richmond, Virginia, is one of the largest comprehensive art museums in the United States. VMFA, which opened in 1936, is a state agency and privately endowed educational institution. Its purpose is to collect, preserve, exhibit, and interpret art, and to encourage the study of the arts. Through the Office of Statewide Partnerships program, the museum offers curated exhibitions, arts-related audiovisual programs, symposia, lectures, conferences, and workshops by visual and performing artists. In addition to presenting a wide array of special exhibitions, the museum provides visitors with the opportunity to experience a global collection of art that spans more than 6,000 years. VMFA's permanent holdings encompass nearly 40,000 artworks, including the largest public collection of Fabergé outside of Russia, the finest collection of Art Nouveau outside of Paris, and one of the nation's finest collections of American art. VMFA is also home to important collections of Chinese art, English silver, and French Impressionist, Post-Impressionist, British sporting, and modern and contemporary art, as well as renowned South Asian, Himalayan, and African art. In May 2010, VMFA opened its doors to the public after a transformative expansion, the largest in its history.

The Virginia Museum of Fine Arts is the only art museum in the United States open 365 days a year with free general admission. For additional information, telephone 804-340-1400 or visit www.VMFA.museum.