Chikō's Mandala

In the mid-eighth century, just a few decades after Gangōji was moved to the new capital of Nara, an eminent monk named **Chikō** created a mandala that changed the course of the temple's history. Mandalas are images of the Buddhist cosmos, and they take various forms among the different schools of Buddhism. Chikō's Mandala is a *hensōzu*, a depiction of Amida Buddha's Pure Land paradise. Belief in the Pure Land and the salvation granted by Amida Buddha is central to the Pure Land school of Buddhism, which became popular among the ruling elite beginning in the mid-tenth century. At that time, *hensōzu* such as Chikō's Mandala were especially powerful tools for conveying the majesty of the Pure Land. Chikō's Mandala portrays Amida Buddha and his attendant bodhisattvas in vivid detail, and for contemporary visitors to the temple, viewing the mandala must have felt like a glimpse of paradise. Subsequently, the popularity of Chikō's Mandala is mentioned in several contemporary diaries kept by traveling aristocrats. It was interest in Chikō's Mandala that brought visitors to Gangōji and kept the temple going after it lost imperial patronage.

Although they are religious images, *hensōzu* mandalas are not one of a kind. Their purpose is to inspire faith in Amida, and so individual mandalas were often reproduced for wider dissemination or in new artistic styles. Chikō's original mandala, which was painted on wood and relatively small (about 30 centimeters on each side), was destroyed by a fire in 1451. Today, the temple displays a larger silk version of the mandala in a tabernacle (*zushi*) on the central dais of the **Gokurakudō**. A modern reproduction of a second, much larger silk version of the mandala, believed to have been created between the fourteenth and sixteenth centuries, hangs on the back of the tabernacle. A third, framed version was created in the late twelfth century by stenciling gold and colored pigment onto a flat board. This third version is kept on the second floor of the Hōrinkan.