

Chuguji: Nyorin-Kanzeon Bodhisattva

Temple tradition says that Prince Shotoku (574–622) had his mother (Empress Anahobe no Hashihito) in mind when he commissioned this elegant camphor-wood statue. Devotees have for centuries revered its contemplative expression and gentle, merciful gaze. In Buddhist lore, Kannon surveys the world looking for signs of suffering. The relaxed seated posture and the right hand delicately touching the cheek suggest that the bodhisattva is pondering how to remove suffering from the world. Experts have contrasted the tender look of this bodhisattva with that of another, rather more austere masterpiece of the Asuka period (593–710), Horyuji Temple's Yumedono Kannon.

The bodhisattva at Chuguji was once painted with a white pigment called *gofun*, made from heating and crushing the shells of clams and oysters, but the coloring has now faded away. Its ebony hue comes from centuries of exposure to smoke from incense, candles, and lanterns. The statue is a depiction of the Miroku Bosatsu (the Buddha of the Future) who resides in heaven, waiting to return to earth at an undetermined time in the future.

This bodhisattva is famous for its beautiful face and smile which is said to be one of the world's three most beautiful smiles. Along with the Sphinx in Egypt and Leonardo's Mona Lisa in the Louvre Museum in Paris. Flanking the statue is a Yakushi Nyorai (the healing Buddha) and an Ashuku Nyorai, the Buddha of Wisdom.