

## **Kofukuji National Treasure Hall**

### **Statue of Ashura**

#### **National Treasure**

Ashura is a demigod of the realm of desire—one of three realms of rebirth in Buddhist cosmology. The gentle, youthful and lively expressions of its three faces give it an appeal unrivaled by other statues of its time. The slender figure is clothed in flowing, realistic robes and trousers. Its uppermost hands would have held symbols of the sun and moon, and the middle ones a bow and arrow. The foremost hands are clasped in prayer, perhaps expressing repentance while listening to the teachings of Buddha.

Ashura are among the Hindu deities incorporated into Buddhism. They are usually depicted as armored, muscular beings with red faces and fangs, but the front face of this statue has an almost contrite expression. The side faces betray resentment—the one on the statue's right appears to be biting its lower lip.

The statue stands 153.4 cm tall, and is made of dry lacquer, in which process lacquer is layered over hemp fabric over a hollow core. It is dated to 734. Computed tomography scans have shown that beneath the front face is another countenance with deeply knitted brows and an open mouth. Some scholars believe that the patroness of the statue, Empress Komyo (701–760), the daughter of Kofukuji's founding patron, Fujiwara no Fuhito (659–720), had this face covered up and re-lacquered with a boyish one as a tribute to her son, the crown prince, who died before his first birthday.