

National Treasure Hall
Head of Yakushi Nyorai
National Treasure

Dated to 685, this rare cast copper alloy sculpture is the head of Yakushi Nyorai, the Buddha of Healing. The statue of which it was part was originally enshrined at Yamadadera Temple in Asuka, about 20 kilometers south of the city of Nara and the Japanese capital at the time.

After the Kofukuji Temple complex was destroyed in 1180 by troops under Taira clan commander Taira no Shigehira (1158–1185), Kofukuji priests removed the Yakushi Nyorai image from Yamadadera and installed it in the reconstructed Eastern Golden Hall of Kofukuji, where it served as the hall's main icon for more than two centuries. In 1411, the Eastern Golden Hall was consumed by fire. As the copper statue melted in the blaze, the head fell off and was damaged on its left side. The head was retrieved and, in 1415, was placed inside the pedestal of the statue's replacement (see No. 24, Statue of Yakushi Nyorai), the current principal image of the hall, and subsequently forgotten. The head was rediscovered in 1937 during repairs to the building. An inscription on wooden boards included with the head told the story of the fire of 1411, enabling researchers to establish its provenance.

Since most surviving Buddhist images from Hakuho culture (645–710) are miniature statues that can only be dated on the basis of style, the discovery of even a part of a full-size Buddha image with a documented date of construction was significant. On the basis of its historical significance and artistic value, the head became one of the few Buddhist image fragments to be declared a National Treasure.