

National Treasure Hall
Statue of Thousand-Armed Kannon
National Treasure

This 5.2-meter-tall statue represents the bodhisattva Kannon, the deity of compassion. The statue served as the principal icon of the Kofukuji Temple dining hall from the thirteenth to the nineteenth centuries. The Kannon is fashioned from wood, and is made in such a way as to appear larger when viewed from some distance away. When viewed close up, however, it appears to be normally proportioned. In the thirteenth century, the sculptor Seicho was initially assigned to the work, but he may have died before its completion, with another sculptor taking over.

The Kannon has a total of 42 hands including two clasped in prayer. Each of the remaining 40 represents 25 hands; 40 is also a number traditionally representing infinity, and symbolizes the bodhisattva's ability to save all sentient beings. The hands grasp a variety of implements, weapons, and symbolic objects.

A number of items were deposited inside the sculpture, including a copy of the *Heart Sutra* from 1217. Research on these objects suggests there was an unusually long and difficult fundraising campaign for the statue that involved many devotees and patrons.

The dining hall was originally erected in 744 and lost to fire twice, including the burning of Nara in 1180 by troops under Taira clan commander Taira no Shigehira (1158–1185). The reconstructed building lasted for centuries, only to be torn down in 1874 as a result of anti-Buddhist movement of the early Meiji era (1868–1912). The Thousand-Armed Kannon escaped destruction and was moved back to its original location after the Kofukuji National Treasure Hall was erected on top of the foundations of the dining hall in 1959.