

National Treasure Hall
Statues of Kongo Rikishi
National Treasures

The Kongo Rikishi are mythological Buddhist warriors wielding Indian *vajra* weapons symbolizing thunderbolts and diamonds. Dating to the early Kamakura period (1185–1333) and created by a sculptor of the Kei school, they are masterpieces of the realism, dramatic movement, and power that are hallmarks of twelfth- and thirteenth-century Japanese Buddhist sculpture. Inlaid crystal eyes, wind-whipped robes, bulging muscles, and protruding veins all reinforce their lifelike appearance.

The statue on the left has its mouth wide open to symbolize the sound *a*, the sound of the first letter of the Sanskrit alphabet, and, philosophically, the realm of the absolute. The right-hand statue has its mouth tightly closed to symbolize the sound *hūṃ*, the sound of the final letter of the alphabet and the realm of phenomena. Together, these symbolize the beginning and the end of all things, or in essence the entire universe.

Kongo Rikishi are most commonly seen as guardian figures at Buddhist temple gates, but during the Nara period (710–794) they were also installed on central altars in temple halls. This pair of statues, carved from joined wood blocks, was originally enshrined in Kofukuji's Western Golden Hall, and was carved as a replacement for a Nara-period pair of sculptures that was lost when the hall burned down in 1180.