

**National Treasure Hall**  
**Head of Shakyamuni Buddha**  
**National Treasure**

This large wood-lacquer head depicts Shakyamuni, the founder of Buddhism who attained enlightenment and vowed to save all sentient beings in the fifth century BCE. Originally covered in gold leaf, it was carved by the renowned Buddhist sculptor Unkei (1150–1223) around 1189. The head was originally part of the principal image of Kofukuji's Western Golden Hall and was created to replace an eighth-century image that had been lost to fire. When the hall burned down in 1717, only artifacts that could be removed from larger works were saved. The statues of Bonten and Taishakuten, also in the Kofukuji National Treasure Hall, were originally displayed alongside the Buddha statue to which this head belonged.

Shakyamuni is depicted with full cheeks and lips, gracefully arched eyebrows and stylized spiral cones (*rahotsu*) signifying the stubble of a shaved head. They indicate that Shakyamuni shaved his head in renunciation of worldly affairs. Another feature of this head is that it lacks an *urna*, the auspicious spiral or dot on its forehead that symbolizes the light that was emitted from the Buddha's forehead before he began to preach. According to Kofukuji legend, the sculptor of the eighth century Buddha was going to place a crystal *urna* in the head of that original statue when the forehead suddenly split open and light poured out. He abandoned his plan for the artificial *urna*, and Unkei, who created the replacement image, followed suit.