

Statue of Rushana Buddha

Toshodaiji's principal image is the Rushana (Vairocana) Buddha. This eighth-century statue, which stands more than 3 meters high, was made using the hollow-core dry lacquer technique, which was at its height during the Nara period (710–794). The painstaking process involves pasting layer upon layer of lacquered hemp fabric onto a clay core. Once dried the core is removed and the lacquer-cloth shell that remains is covered with layers of various composite lacquers, such as a putty made from lacquer mixed with wheat flour. The final stage in the production of this statue was to cover it in gold leaf, which was also applied to the lotus flower dais and the halo behind the image. The halo, which is over 5 meters high, is engraved with lotus petals and 864 small buddhas, originally thought to have numbered one thousand.

A translation of Buddhist texts by the fourth century monk Kumarajiva includes a passage explaining the symbolism of such imagery:

[indented quote]

I, Rushana Buddha, sit on a lotus dais surrounded by a thousand lotus petals on which a thousand buddhas are manifested. Within each petal are a billion realms and within each realm is a [smaller] buddha who sits beneath a bodhi tree, following the Buddha Way. The original body of the one thousand larger buddhas and the billion smaller buddhas is Rushana. ... Below [them] ... is a mass of countless [bodhisattvas] approaching me, listening to my recitation of the Buddha Precepts and opening the gates of enlightenment.

[end indented quote]

[Reference: "The Cambridge History of Japan Vol. 1" Delmer M Brown (Cambridge University Press 1988) p. 402]