

Portrait Statue of Ganjin

This image of Ganjin is Japan's oldest portrait sculpture and a celebrated example of the hollow-core dry-lacquer sculpting technique that flourished during the Nara period (710–794). It is believed that Ninki, one of Ganjin's disciples, was charged with supervising production of the statue, which is thought to have been completed in 763, the year of Ganjin's death.

Part of the hollow-core dry-lacquer method involves pasting layers of lacquered hemp cloth onto a core frame. Examination of the statue has revealed that the hemp material used for Ganjin's image was from pre-owned clothing, and, as monks' robes tend to be made from hemp fabric, a theory has emerged that Ganjin's own clothing was possibly affixed to the statue.

The colors of this statue remain vivid, and the expression subtly captures Ganjin's indomitable spirit, unbowed by the numerous hardships he faced during his six attempts to travel to Japan over a period of 12 years. This included the loss of his eyesight, which might explain why his eyes are closed, an unusual case among examples of portrait sculpture.

Ganjin was widely admired, including by the emperor. When a fire broke out at the Kaizando Hall in the mid-nineteenth century, devotees risked their lives to save the image, which they fervently protected in the belief that Ganjin still lived through the statue.

While the National Treasure statue is only open for public viewing three days a year, a replica completed in 2013 can be found in the Kaizando Hall just southwest of the Mieido.