

Seated Statue of Monju Bosatsu

Monju personifies wisdom. The bodhisattva is seated with folded legs, a serene expression, and a sacred sword clasped in the right hand. Monju appears alone here, but he is usually pictured atop a mythical lion (*shishi*). The weapon he holds is no ordinary blade. Rather, it is one connected with the *vajra*, a jewel-encrusted ritual implement that symbolizes the power of Buddhist wisdom to cut through illusion and delusion. Although not present in the statue at Ninnaji, the lion symbolizes Buddhism's power and the roaring voice of the Buddhist law.

This bodhisattva once held something in his left hand as well—perhaps the stem of a lotus flower or *bonkyo* sutras written on palm leaves—now long lost to time. Like several other statues at Ninnaji that represent landmarks in the evolution of Japanese Buddhist art, this sculpture has been designated an Important Cultural Property. The drapery of Monju's garments, not to mention the slightly more secularized portrayal of the bodhisattva, suggests significant influence from the sculpture of Song-dynasty China (960-1279). Other aspects seem to draw on traditions from different time periods and parts of the globe. The carved eyes, for example, indicate a much older sculpting method as Song-dynasty sculptures often had crystal or glass eyes.