

Statue of Eleven-Headed Kannon

National Treasure

Hokkeji's statue of Kannon stands 1 meter tall and dates from the early Heian period (794–1185). Kannon, often referred to as the bodhisattva of mercy, is believed to protect people from illness and help them secure food and wealth. The eleven heads set atop the statue's head have a range of expressions, but the largest radiates compassion and tranquility. There are several interpretations of why there are eleven heads, including the belief that the lower ten represent the stages on the path to enlightenment, while the uppermost represents buddhahood.

According to legend, the king of Gandhara, an ancient state in present-day Afghanistan and Pakistan, was told in a dream to worship the empress of Japan if he sought the true Kannon. He sent a Buddhist teacher to Japan who modeled three Kannon statues after Empress Komyo (701–760), one of which was placed at Hokkeji.

Carved from a single block of Japanese nutmeg wood, the statue is unique in several respects. Framed by alternating lotus leaves and flowers, the carving represents Empress Komyo, Hokkeji's founder, stepping out of a lotus pool. In an arrangement rarely seen in this type of statue, the right foot is positioned at an angle with an upturned big toe. The figure also has elongated arms and lifelike hair ornamented by metallic accouterments. The original statue is kept in a miniature sanctuary in the Main Hall and is open to view during only three periods a year. A full-sized replica remains permanently on display.