

The 1,001 Kannon Bodhisattva Sculptures of Sanjūsangendō

The Forms and Attributes of Kannon

The principal icon of Sanjūsangendō is the all-seeing, all-compassionate bodhisattva Kannon, known as Avalokiteshvara in Sanskrit and Guanyin in Chinese. Kannon is a key figure in Mahayana Buddhism, revered for an unflagging determination to assist sentient beings and guide them toward salvation. Kannon's efficacy comes in part from the ability to assume 33 different forms, each one uniquely suited to different circumstances.

The manifestation of Kannon with 1,000 arms and 11 heads is the one that is worshiped at Sanjūsangendō. The 1,000 arms hold various ritual implements of Buddhism as well as tools and weapons which Kannon can use to provide assistance to living beings in any number of situations. The 11 heads make it possible to gaze into multiple directions and realms. The central one is Amida (Amitābha), the Buddha of Infinite Light, symbolizing Kannon's service to this buddha as well as the ultimate salvation offered by Amida, which Kannon can assist in attaining.

In the center of the hall is a large Thousand-armed Kannon seated in a meditative posture. On either side are an additional five hundred standing images of the same deity. Although these one thousand sculptures are much smaller, what they lack in stature they make up for in detail and individuality. Each one is said to be unique. Each sculpture has a total of 40 arms, with two joined in prayer in front, while the remainder are

attached to the rear of the figure and fan out on each side. Each arm is thought to exist simultaneously in twenty-five parallel realms, bringing the total number of arms to 1,000.

History of the Sculptures

The original 1,001 sculptures of Kannon were made for the opening of Sanjūsangendō in 1164, during the Heian period. Many of them, including the central icon, were unfortunately lost during the Kamakura-period fire of 1249. However, the sculptures were recreated soon after the fire in their original Heian style by leading Buddhist sculptors of the day including sculptors of the Kei school. The seated statue of Kannon that is the principal image of worship was completed around 1255 under the direction of the revered Kei sculptor Tankei (1173–1256).

Each image was crafted from multiple blocks of Japanese cypress using a joint-block construction technique and coated in lacquer before being covered in gold leaf. Several have wooden tablets at the base with the name of the sculptor inscribed.

The worship of Kannon became extremely popular in Japan from around the eleventh century—a time when people were convinced that the world and the Buddhist law had entered a period of inevitable decline (*mappō*). Under such circumstances, the saving power of a bodhisattva was widely understood to be the only way to attain liberation.