

## ***Komainu***

*Komainu* (lion-dog) sculptures are typically encountered in pairs. They guard sacred locations such as temples and shrines by warding off evil spirits. The two sculptures comprising a *komainu* pair appear similar, but there are noticeable differences. One has an open mouth, while the other is a closed mouth. The pair also show distinct Chinese characteristics where one is sheltering a cub, while the other is clutching a *mari*—a type of ball.

Various theories have been advanced regarding the meaning behind this difference. Some say the open-mouthed statue is voicing the “a,” the first letter of the Sanskrit alphabet, while its counterpart is making an “um” sound. When combined, these two sounds result in “aum,” a sacred Buddhist syllable that signifies the beginning and end of all things.

The open-mouthed statue is 60.6 centimeters, the other is 62.1 centimeters tall. One expert has surmised that they date from the early Kamakura period (1185–1333).