

## Wooden Statues of Prince Shōtoku

Gangōji's collection of Buddhist statuary contains two images of Imperial Prince Shōtoku (572–622), a central figure in the establishment of Buddhism in Japan. Prince Shōtoku was born the nephew of Empress Suiko (r. 592–628), who appointed him regent in 593. The following year, at Shōtoku's suggestion, the empress issued an edict to formalize the imperial patronage of Buddhism. This show of support was crucial to the creation of Hōkōji Temple, the precursor to Gangōji, and vital to the establishment of Buddhism in Japan.

Shōtoku was himself a devout Buddhist, and he is the recorded author of three published commentaries on major Buddhist texts. In the centuries that followed, Shōtoku went from being seen as a political figure to an object of worship. The name by which he is now known, meaning "Prince of Sagacious Virtue," was given to him after his death.

Shōtoku has been featured in didactic Buddhist folktales (*setsuwa*), in which he is portrayed as a brilliant and exalted sage, or even as a manifestation of Amida Buddha or Shakyamuni Buddha himself. He is also said to be the first person who was reborn in Amida's Pure Land paradise, paving the way for others to follow. This elevation of Shōtoku is the inspiration for statues such as these, which depict him as a holy figure. These statues were previously kept in the Taishidō, a special hall for worship of Prince Shōtoku. During the fifteenth century, Gangōji was so central to his worship that the temple itself was referred to as the "Taishidō of Nara." The hall was lost to fire in 1859, but the two statues were saved. Both statues are designated Important Cultural Properties.

### *Prince Shōtoku at Sixteen Years Old* (1268)

This statue depicts Prince Shōtoku engaged in prayers for his ailing father, demonstrating the young prince's strong Confucian sense of filial piety.

The prince's hairstyle is a central part pulled into two bobs at the sides of his head. Known as a *mizura*, this style was typically worn by aristocratic young men of the eighth century. Shōtoku is also shown wearing Buddhist vestments consisting of a stole (*ōhi*) and seven-panel kasaya (*kesa*) worn over the crimson robes (*hō*) of the imperial court. The prince raises the folds of his stole with his left hand, and his right hand holds an incense burner of the sort used during Buddhist ceremonies.

Based on documents found within the statue's body, it is believed to have been made to mark the 650th anniversary of the prince's birth, and as many as 5,000 individuals

gave donations to fund its creation.

*Prince Shōtoku at One Year Old* (13th century)

This statue shows Prince Shōtoku as an infant, his hands clasped in prayer. This pose references an event that is said to have occurred on the fifteenth day of the second month, the anniversary of the death of Shakyamuni Buddha. The young prince is said to have escaped his wetnurse's hands and faced east, intoning a Buddhist prayer called the *nenbutsu*. According to a biography of Prince Shōtoku, he continued this practice until the age of seven. Supposedly, a relic (*shari*) of Shakyamuni's left eye appeared between the prince's clasped hands, and that relic is said to be stored in the reliquary at Hōryūji Temple.

Statues depicting this moment were especially popular during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. The statue's childlike features, contrasting its pious bearing and intense gaze, give a strong impression of the young prince's exceptional wisdom.