

Buddhist Statues of the Wakasa Region

Overview

The Wakasa region has a large number of valuable Buddhist statues for a non-metropolitan area. Many of them are high-quality works created in the former capitals of Nara and Kyoto that are designated Important Cultural Properties. The presence of such sculptures can be attributed to several factors, including the early spread of Buddhism to Wakasa, the relative proximity to the old capitals, the wealth generated by Obama's port trade, and the fact that the region was largely spared from the damages of civil war. While some statues are kept in the Wakasa History Museum, most remain in the same temples where they have been worshipped for centuries.

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The Spread of Buddhism to Wakasa

After Buddhism was introduced to Japan from mainland Asia in the sixth century, it was accepted in the capital and promoted through the founding of temples. This was furthered by an imperial order issued in 741, requiring each province to establish a state-sponsored temple (*kokubunji*). In Wakasa Province, a *kokubunji* temple was constructed in 807.

Judging by the age of certain statues and temples, Buddhism seems to have reached Wakasa more quickly compared to some other regions. This is attributed in part to the number of monks that traveled there for ascetic training. The mountains of Wakasa were reportedly a popular choice for such training, being far enough from the capital to feel removed from the cultural and political center, but close enough for an easy return if need be. Early exposure to Buddhism contributed to the deep attachment to the faith that prevails among people in the region.

Statuary through the Ages

The Buddhist statue believed to be the oldest in Wakasa was created sometime between the late seventh and the early eighth century. It depicts Kannon, the bodhisattva of compassion, in an eleven-headed form. Dating Buddhist statuary includes analyzing the technical skill involved and identifying visual characteristics typical for certain historical periods, in addition to purely scientific methods. A display board along the wall uses sculptures of Kannon to illustrate the differences between works produced in different eras.

Asuka through Nara Periods (552–794): Early Buddhist statues from the sixth to the eighth centuries were carved with stylized features and mysterious expressions. They were usually made of wood or gilt bronze.

Heian Period (794–1185): In the ninth and tenth centuries, statues were more likely to be made of wood. A single piece of wood was used to carve the entire figure in a technique called *ichiboku-zukuri*. In combination with the use of large tree trunks, this method made it possible to create sculptures with much bigger, taller bodies. The works of that period became grander and more imposing, with sterner facial expressions and clothing with heavy folds.

The statues of the eleventh and twelfth centuries are characterized by gentler, warmer expressions, round faces, and slender bodies dressed in light, draping robes. The *yosegi-zukuri* (joined woodblock) technique, in which parts of the sculpture were carved separately and then assembled for more detailed work, was introduced and popularized during that time.

Kamakura Period (1185–1333): In the thirteenth century, Buddhist sculpture style began to shift toward more realistic depictions of the face, body, and clothing. Figures were carved with determined facial expressions and a certain tension in the form. The *gyokugan* (literally “jewel eyes”) technique of adding crystal eyes that shone in the low lighting of temple interiors became popular.

Flourishing Temples in an Era of Trade

The wars that occurred from the twelfth to the early seventeenth century caused the destruction of many religious institutions and priceless treasures across Japan. Although some conflict did occur in the Wakasa area, it was spared the large-scale battles that ravaged many other provinces. Fewer temples and statues made of wood were lost to fire, and surviving temple records have proved invaluable to modern researchers.

Another factor that contributed to the presence of high-quality Buddhist statuary in the region was the flourishing trade in Obama, which was a thriving port town for centuries. It was especially prosperous in the Edo period (1603–1867), when religious institutions were supported by the imperial court, the Sakai family who ruled the Obama domain,

and wealthy merchants. This gave temples the means to obtain valuable sculptures made by experienced craftsmen in Kyoto.

Protection from the Anti-Buddhist Movement

Buddhism and Shinto were practiced in a syncretic fusion for over a thousand years, but in 1868, the Meiji government issued an order to separate the two religions. This triggered a wave of anti-Buddhist sentiment, and many temples, statues, and other works of art were lost. However, in present-day Wakasa there are temples enshrining statues of Shinto deities, as well as temples with sculptures thought to have been transferred from other locations to save them from harm. The deep faith of the people in the region helped preserve many treasures that would otherwise have been destroyed.