

MIA Friends Newsletter
Collection Connection for January 2013
Eleven-headed Kannon (#2012.32a,b)
Yuji Honbori (Japan, b.1958)

“One man’s trash is another man’s treasure.” No, this isn’t the tag line for a show on HGTV. It is Japanese sculptor Yuji Honbori’s explanation for his interest in turning discarded materials into beautiful works of art.

Trained at the Aichi Prefectural University of Fine Arts and Music in Kobe, Japan, Honbori began his career as a recycler using wood from demolished houses. His *Eleven-headed Kannon*, a recent MIA acquisition, is part of a series of life-size figures made out of used materials and based on historic Buddhist sculptures.

Kannon is a bodhisattva—a divine being who has delayed entering nirvana in order to help others achieve enlightenment. Kannon is the most widely worshipped of all the bodhisattvas in Japan, and the Kannon that served as the model for the MIA’s sculpture is definitely a treasure. Dating from the 8th century and enshrined at the Shorinji Temple in Nara, it has been declared a National Treasure by the Japanese government.

As for the trash part, Honbori’s Kannon is made out of cardboard. To be precise, it was made out of used fruit and vegetable crates that he rescued from his local grocery store. Honbori has said that far from attempting to disguise the humble beginnings of these materials he wants people to be able to see the food stains on the cardboard and identify the words describing the boxes’ original contents—words like onions, or cabbage, or oranges.

Honbori begins the process of transforming his used cardboard crates into art by drawing an outline of the sculpture he is recreating on paper. He then traces the outline onto cardboard and cuts the cardboard into the desired shape; one of his large-scale sculptures can be made up of thousands of individual cardboard pieces glued together. The result is both respectful of the Buddhist statues that he replicates and playful evidence that trash can indeed be turned into treasure.

After you’ve enjoyed Honbori’s contemporary *Eleven-headed Kannon* in Gallery 275 make sure to stop in Gallery 281 to take a look at another treasure, the MIA’s bronze *Standing Kannon* from 7th century Japan.

Mary Grau

