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## Title of Object

Bonten

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## Photo of Object (optional)



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## Object Information

**Artist:** Unknown

**Culture:** Japanese

**Date of Object:** late 10<sup>th</sup> century

**Country:** Japan

**Accession Number:** 2015.79.261

**File Created:** 5/3/2016

**Material/Medium:** Japanese cypress (hinoki), sculpture

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**Department:** Japanese and Korean Art

**Reviewer of File:** Kara ZumBahlen

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## Tour Topics

Group 5 tour, Wabi sabi, ancient culture, architecture, cultural encounters/exchanges, fashion/dress, gods/goddesses, ritual/ceremony, spirituality/sacred, symbolism, Hinduism, Buddhism

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## Questions and Activities (list 3 to 4 sample questions here):

1. What stands out to you as you look at this sculpture? (i.e. concepts of wabi sabi – incomplete, impermanent, imperfect)
2. Describe how this guardian figure differs from the guardian figures we looked at initially (i.e. ferocious vs serene; active vs static; ichiboku (single-block) vs yosegi (joined wood) technique)
3. What emotion do you think the artist was trying to evoke?
4. What objects do you treasure because of their age and appearance? (patina, faded color, the wisdom and beauty of imperfection)

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## Key Points (Form: subject matter, medium and techniques of manufacture, style, etc.)

Bonten is one of twelve celestial guardians in Buddhism (previously adopted from Hinduism). Bonten being one of twelve celestial guardians in Buddhism - they were adopted from Hinduism. Bonten was Brahma in Hinduism and is known as the creator god. Bonten is usually depicted with Taishakuten, another celestial guardian, and together they flank the Buddha (with Bonten on Buddha's left). Devotees would say prayers and chant in front of the sculptures which would have been placed on the west side of a temple, midway back, or to the rear.

Bonten is also known as the "Universal Soul" and he is associated with heaven. Bonten is depicted wearing court robes over armor (a breast plate or Japanese 'do') that would have been made of leather and hardened with resin when it was worn by the Samurai Warrior class. Bonten's mudra is 'have no fear' and he is often depicted standing or sitting on a lotus pedestal and/or a lotus pedestal supported by a goose (or geese). Bonten and Taishakuten have a similar appearance and their identification is often blurred, as one or the other (but never both) is depicted with armor when they flank the Buddha. This sometimes makes it difficult to differentiate the two guardians (unless Taishakuten is shown on his vehicle, the elephant).

Bonten is wearing court robes with a 'honpa' or rolling wave pattern on the sleeve and lower edge of the gown and below the waist. A curved (scoop) neckline complements the softness of the sculptural design, respect for nature, and the sacred quality of the wood itself.

The sculpture was made of Japanese Cypress (hinoki) which is revered for its pale golden color, aromatic scent, sacred qualities (deities and spirits are believed to inhabit cypress and many other trees including sandalwood, nutmeg, and camphor). Hinoki is highly resistant to rot however for centuries, like many other trees, it has a major predator. The Bark beetle is the size of a grain of rice and it chews into the wood of dead or dying trees, trees that are newly felled, and wood sculptures that are brought into temples or shrines that are already infested). The Bark beetle lays its eggs and the larva tunnel through the wood often decimating it completely, leaving exit holes on the surface. There is no solution other than cutting off or removing an attached part that has been infested, and sometimes even that is not enough to prevent total destruction.

The Ichiboku (single wood block) technique was used to make this sculpture. Although there were originally additional pieces for arms and a lotus pedestal (now absent), the main portion of the sculpture was made from one piece of wood. This technique limited the amount of action/movement and often resulted in cracking of the sculpture due to swelling of the outer surface of the wood. In comparison, the yosegi (multiple block technique) that was developed later, allowed for imperceptible connecting pieces and the appearance of dramatic movement, S-curve in the body, and swirling drapery.

This sculpture of Bonten may have been painted and lacquered as evidenced by a trace of red paint on the back of the shawl, however it is unknown if it was part of the original surface detail or added at a later date.

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## Key Points (Context: use, history, cultural information, artist bio, etc.)

Wabi-Sabi represents Japanese aesthetics and a world view centered on the acceptance of transience and imperfection. Characteristics of the wabi-sabi aesthetic include: asymmetry, roughness or

irregularity, simplicity, intimacy; appreciation of the integrity of natural objects and the naturally occurring patterns and rhythms in the design, along with evidence of natural processes.

The late Heian Period (794-1185) was a time of relative peace, the Golden Age of art and literature, and a time when Japan experienced a strong sense of native aesthetics. In the late Heian period the Amida faith spread among the aristocracy, and with growing demand for new temples and new Buddhist images a division of labor took place in the production of Buddhist sculptures that were portrayed as peaceful and contemplative instead of ferocious in appearance. Wood was increasingly used as it was highly revered for aesthetic, spiritual and cultural reasons. Shinto and Buddhism coexisted peacefully during the Heian Period.

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### Current Mia Label Information (optional)

This Buddhist guardian figure is likely Bonten (Brahma in Hinduism). He stands at attention, shawl over his shoulders, armor underneath. And although he's missing both arms and has been ravaged by insects, his gentle appearance and soft facial features are enough to suggest an origin in the second half of the 900s, when Buddhist sculptors turned away from earlier, more powerful depictions of Buddhist figures. The artist used the ichiboku technique, which also dates to the 10th century, to carve the main body of the sculpture from a single block of wood.

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### Sources of Information and/or Prop Ideas (photos/videos)

From the Asia Society, History of Buddhism in Japan: <http://asiasociety.org/education/buddhism-japan>

Article from Encyclopedia Britannica, on Japanese Art: <https://www.britannica.com/art/Japanese-art/Heian-period>

From the Asian Art Museum, San Francisco (Bonten and Taishakuten, from Nara Period):

<http://www.asianart.org/collections/brhma-and-indra>, with photos of Bonten:

<http://searchcollection.asianart.org/view/objects/asitem/search@/0?t:state:flow=00259f59-5b77-46c1-9126-71b0ab47cccb>

Koren, Leonard. *Wabi-Sabi: For Artists, Designers, Poets & Philosophers*, 2008.

Mason, Penelope. *History of Japanese Art*, 2nd Edition, 2005.

Murase, Miyeko. *Bridge of Dreams: The Mary Griggs Burke Collection of Japanese Art*. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2000.

Murase, Miyeko. *Japanese Art: Selections from the Mary and Jackson Burke Collection*. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1975.