

---

## Title of Object

Vajra Warriors

---

## Photo of Object (optional)



---

## Object Information

**Artist:** Unknown

**Culture:** Japanese

**Date of Object:** mid-14<sup>th</sup> century

**Country:** Japan

**Accession Number:** 83.76.1 and 2

**File Created:** 5/18/2016

**Material/Medium:** Polychromed Japanese cypress (hinoki) with lacquer

**Author of File:** Cathie Wemlinger

**Department:** Japanese and Korean Art

**Reviewer of File:** Kara ZumBahlen

**Last Updated/Reviewed:** 6/30/2016

---

## Tour Topics

Group 5 tour, ancient culture, architecture, power/status, spirituality/sacred, symbolism, Buddhism

---

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

1. Take time to look at both guardian figures. They were made in the 1300's to protect a Japanese Buddhist temple against evil thoughts and deeds. What do you see that that might make them good protectors?
2. Misshaku Kongo is depicted uttering the sound "a". Naeren Kongo express the sound "un". The two sounds symbolize the beginning and end of all things and remind the Buddhist of the brevity of life. Compare the two guardian figures. In what other ways are the figures different? What is the same about them?
3. What are the figures standing on? How can you tell? What does that tell us about their domain?
4. What would you want outside your home to protect it? What would it protect? Why?

---

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

Each guardian figure is constructed from several blocks of fine-grained Japanese cypress, or hinoki [hee-noh-kee], joined together. This inventive technique of multiple block construction, called yosegi [yo-see-gee], freed the sculptor from the constraints imposed by the dimensions of a single block of wood and enabled him to create dynamic poses on a monumental scale

Apprentices and assistants supported the master sculptor by roughly shaping the blocks of wood, helping carve details and hollowing out the wood blocks to lighten the structure and reduce the potential for cracking. The separate wood blocks were then assembled using joined-wood construction. The surface of the assembled structure was finished with a curved-edge chisel. Because parts of the wood are exposed, we can tell that the carving on these figures is of exceptionally fine quality.

Originally, both guardians sported brightly colored paint over a layer of black lacquer. The lacquer, now worn away, was not applied directly to the wood's surface, but rather over a ground of plaster-like glue called gesso. Traces of the whitish gesso are still visible on the sculptures' surface. The bare wood we now see would not have been visible.

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

This pair of Japanese guardian figures originally flanked the entrance gate to a 14th-century Buddhist temple compound. Carved with fierce facial expressions and dynamic gestures to ward off evil, the temple guardians display both strength and energy, qualities admired by the samurai warrior rulers who controlled Japan at the time. The two figures stand for different strength. Misshaku Kongo (Agyo) represents overt strength; he bares his teeth and raises his fist in action. Naeraen Kongo (Ungyo) represents latent power, holding his mouth tightly closed and waits with both arms lowered.

The Ni-o guardian figures were created during an era characterized by constant civic warfare. During the late Kamakura (kahm-ah-rah) period (1185–1333) and the subsequent Nambokucho (nahm-bow-ku-cho) period (1333 to 1392), samurai warriors established a military government that unseated the emperor's claim to power. The samurai, known for their skill in martial arts, established their political power according to a code called "The Way of the Warrior," based on bravery and honor. In general, whoever led the ruling clan received the title of shogun, or supreme military commander. The new shogun rulers, who lacked the book learning and refinement of the former courtiers, popularized religion, literature and art--making them more accessible to the masses. The mighty Ni-o guardian figures became especially popular subjects during this turbulent period.

---

## Current Mia Label Information (optional)

Ni-ō, literally "two kings," are guardian images which flank the entrances of Buddhist temples. Befitting their role as protectors of the Buddhist faith, they are usually depicted as ferocious, semi-nude figures with exaggerated musculature and facial expressions. They are represented as uttering the cosmic sounds of "a" (open-mouthed) and "un" the first and last letters of the Sanskrit alphabet, symbolizing the beginning and ending of all things, thus reminding us of the brevity of life. The hyper-realism and full-plasticity of these figures was achieved through the yosegi technique of multiple block construction. Originally, both images would have been brightly painted over a layer of black lacquer.

AND: A pair of Vajra warriors, also known as the Two Kings (Niō), guards the entrances of many Japanese Buddhist temples. Befitting their role as protectors of the dharma, or Buddhist law, they are ferocious, seminude figures with exaggerated musculature and facial expressions. The extreme realism of these figures was achieved through the yosegi technique of multiple-block construction, meaning they were carved in smaller sections and then assembled into the large figure. Originally, both warriors would have been first covered in a layer of shiny black lacquer, and then colorfully painted. Hundreds of years of exposure to the elements now reveal the carved cypress wood beneath those layers. The shape of their mouths indicate that they are speaking the cosmic sounds of “a” (open-mouthed) and “un.” These are the first and last letters of the Sanskrit alphabet, symbolizing the beginning and ending of all things, thus reminding us of the brevity of life.

---

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

Docent files, Mia website, IPE website, World’s Myths & Legends in Art (Mia) web ([http://archive.artsmia.org/world-myths/viewallart/nio\\_background.html](http://archive.artsmia.org/world-myths/viewallart/nio_background.html))

Dictionary

Khan Academy information on guardian figures at Todai-ji: <https://www.khanacademy.org/test-prep/ap-art-history/south-east-se-asia/japan-art/a/todai-ji>

Nio Guardian figure at Cleveland Art Museum: <http://www.clevelandart.org/art/1972.158.1>