
Title of Object

Portrait Sculpture of Priest Gyōki

Photo of Object (optional)



Object Information

Artist: unknown

Culture: Japanese

Date of Object: early 17th century

Country: Japan

Accession Number: 95.85A-C

File Created: 11/1/2016

Material/Medium: Wood, gesso, lacquer, pigment, and gold

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Last Updated/Reviewed: 8/31/2017

Tour Topics

Buddhism, Spirituality/Sacred, identity, stories/storytelling, symbolism, ritual/ceremony, power/status, bodhisattva, honor, temple, sculpture, portrait

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

- 1) What emotion or temperament do you think the artist was trying to convey?
 - 2) What attributes of this sculpture portray a human being with a foot in (the realm of) the divine?
 - 3) Why do you think the social message of Gyōki's time is still pertinent today?
 - 4) What elements of the sculpture make us think this was an important person?
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Key Points (Form: subject matter, medium and techniques of manufacture, style, etc.)

1) The sculpture is made of Japanese cypress (cryptomeria) using the yosegi or multi-block technique. It is covered with gesso, lacquer, pigment and gold. The sculpture is a 17th century copy of a 13th century portrait sculpture. (Mia)

2) Modern restoration attempts (by previous owners) resulted in irregular contours in the face as the blocks were unable to be replaced in the seamless and smooth surface achieved by the 17th century sculptor. (Mia)

3) In Japan, there is a long-standing tradition of making life-sized portrait sculptures of virtuous individuals who have passed away. These sculptures are placed in temples where they are treated with reverence and respect. Monks make daily offerings and conduct annual memorial services before these images, and are so reminded of the past priest's selfless example. (Mia)

4) This sculpture of Gyōki is the only one in the west. Gyōki is still honored in Japan today.

5) Gyōki holds a kind of scepter, known as a nyoi (pronounced NYOY) in Japanese. Buddhist priests typically carry nyoi while conducting formal ceremonies Nyoi have large, lobed head which is thought to be a stylized cloud-eared mushroom, an auspicious symbol of long life and thought to have potent medicinal properties. It is carved of wood, covered in black lacquer and gold leaf. (Interview with Matthew Welch)

6) Gyōki was considered a living bodhisattva, but he was also a very real person. He wears the robes of a monk. If you look closely, I think you can see patches of black and red, even though some pigment has been lost. The pattern of black and red is meant to represent the priest's kesa (pronunciation: "KAY-sah"), or ceremonial stole. In the past, members of the aristocracy would donate their gorgeous, but worn, robes to Buddhist monasteries. The monks would salvage undamaged pieces of cloth and sew them together in patchwork fashion to create these kesa. In this way, they demonstrated their frugality. (Interview with Matthew Welch)

6. The most obvious example of this kind of person today is the Dalai Lama, who is also considered to be a living Bodhisattva. (Interview with Matthew Welch)

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

1) Gyōki lived in the 8th century during the Nara Period of Japan. He may have been of Korean descent (his ancestors immigrated to Japan about 100 years before his birth). Gyōki took his preliminary vows to become a monk when he was 15 years old and he was ordained nine years later after studying Mountain Buddhism and Mahayana Buddhism. (Augustine and Goodwin)

2) The Nara period was a time of temple building and the flowering of art and culture. It was also a time of strict regulations for monks and nuns – they were to stay in their temples and pray for the Imperial Court and the state. Gyōki ignored these regulations - he worked in secular matters (non-religious) and non-secular (religious) matters to benefit the poor. (Augustine and Goodwin)

3) Gyōki started the first social welfare system in Japan and he also undertook projects, much like a civil engineer, to develop an infrastructure for the poor in rural Japan. He was threatened with imprisonment and loss of his monk's status by the emperor, who eventually placed an Imperial Ban on Gyōki (meaning anyone could harm or kill him without recourse). However the emperor came to his own spiritual awakening and realized, as did others, that Gyōki was a reincarnation of the celestial bodhisattva, Monju. The emperor eventually pardoned Gyōki and late in life the two worked together to raise funds and supplies to build a 53 foot bronze Buddha (Daibutsu) and the largest wood frame structure in the world (Daibutsu-den) on the grounds of Todai-ji temple in Nara, Japan. (Augustine and Goodwin)

4) The construction of Todai-ji and the sculpture of the Daibutsu was a massive undertaking. According to records kept by Tōdai-ji, more than 2,600,000 people in total helped construct the Great Buddha and its Hall; contributing rice, wood, metal, cloth, or labor; with 350,000 working directly on the statue's construction. The 16 m (52 ft) high statue was built through eight castings over three years, the head and neck being cast together as a separate element. The making of the statue was started first in Shigaraki. After enduring multiple fires and earthquakes, the construction was eventually resumed in Nara in 745, and the Buddha was finally completed in 751. A year later, in 752, the eye-opening ceremony was held with an attendance of 10,000 monks and 4,000 dancers to celebrate the completion of the Buddha. (Wikipedia)

5) At the age of 80, the year of his death, Gyōki was honored by the emperor with two titles: Daisōjō (Senior Primary prelate; high-ranking priest) and bosatsu (living bodhisattva). (Augustine and Goodwin)

Current Mia Label Information (optional)

Gyōki was one of the most celebrated Buddhist priests of Japan's Nara period (645-794), revered as much for his spirituality as for his social and civic accomplishments. His most monumental undertaking was the casting of the colossal bronze Buddha of Todai-ji temple during the mid-8th century.

This statue of Gyōki was created during the 17th century when interest in the life of the priest was rekindled during the renovation of Tōdai-ji and the bronze Buddha. Based on a 13th-century portrait-sculpture now in the collection of Tōshōdaiji temple in Nara, this work suggests the priest's stern personality and fierce determination. Accomplished priests were believed to be living bodhisattvas. After such a priest died, portrait statues were created and placed in special worship halls where monks made ritual offerings and performed daily religious devotions.

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

Interview with Matthew Welch, posted on <http://jacksjapan.blogspot.com/2012/10/the-emperor-and-bodhisattva.html>

Art of Asia, artsmia.org: <http://archive.artsmia.org/art-of-asia/buddhism/buddhism-whos-who.cfm>

Tōdai-ji: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tōdai-ji>

SELECT BIBLIOGRAPHY

Augustine, Jonathan M. (2005) Buddhist Hagiography in Early Japan: Images of compassion in the Gyōki tradition. London: RoutledgeCurzon.

Goodwin, Janet R. "Building Bridges and Saving Souls. The Fruits of Evangelism in Medieval Japan." Monumenta Nipponica, Vol. 44, No. 22 (Summer, 1989), Sophia University, pp.137-149

Possible Tour Title: People Who Made History, with Tour Theme: The Measure of a Man

"The ultimate measure of a man is not where he stands in moments of comfort and convenience but where he stands in times of challenge and controversy" (quote by Martin Luther King, Jr.)

IPAD IMAGES: 1) Monju, celestial bodhisattva and 2) Daibutsu Buddha