



Shukongojin

12th/14th century

Japan

THE ART INSTITUTE OF CHICAGO

Department of Museum Education

Division of Teacher Programs

Crown Family Educator Resource Center

ART
INSTITUTE
CHICAGO

Japan

Shukongojin, 12th/14th century

Wood with traces of polychromy

91 cm high

Kate S. Buckingham Endowment, 1958.120

The Art Institute's figure of Shukongojin (pronounced "shoe-cone-gō-jean"), the Japanese thunderbolt deity who protects the laws of Buddhism, would have originally stood guard at a temple. His fierce and ominous features—the hard, downward stare of his crystal eyes, his menacing grimace, his rippling muscles, and his aggressively raised arm—were intended to frighten away any thoughts or entities that might distract devotees coming to the temple and served to remind them of the sacredness of its space. The wooden sculpture was painted in bold colors in order to imbue Shukongojin with an otherworldly and terrifying presence. Fiery red, a color usually reserved for demons, covers the body, while traces of gold on the loincloth signal his divine nature. These powerful colors and the figure's dynamic pose and expression along with its symbolic gestures and attributes would have been clearly understood by Buddhist devotees, including the emerging warrior class of the **Kamakura** (A.D. 1185–1333) and **Muromachi** (A.D. 1392–1573) periods in Japan, when it is believed this sculpture was produced.

The religion and philosophy of Buddhism originated on the Indian subcontinent where the **historical Buddha Shakyamuni** lived and taught in the sixth–fifth centuries B.C. The practice spread to East Asia beginning in the first century B.C., arriving in Japan in the sixth century A.D. when monks and missionaries from China and Korea brought both texts and **icons** that were unknown in pre-Buddhist Japan. While many different **sects** of Buddhism have developed over time, the primary beliefs follow the teachings of Shakyamuni and focus the devotee's spiritual activity towards the attainment of **nirvana**, the merging of the inner spirit with the void from which all reality is believed to emerge.

As Buddhism developed and spread across Asia, a **pantheon** of deities developed to assist the faithful in their spiritual journey. Shukongojin is one of many protective gods, safeguarding the practitioners and sacred spaces of Buddhism. Originally worshipped in India, such guardian deities are depicted with the **vajra**, the **Sanskrit** word for thunderbolt. It was the *vajrapani*, or "thunderbolt holders," that specifically guarded the historical Buddha. Said to be unbreakable yet capable of breaking anything, the vajra symbolizes the ability to penetrate ignorance and destroy evil, thus protecting the faith. Imbedded in Shukongojin's name is the word *kongo*, the Japanese translation of vajra, which the Art Institute's figure holds in his raised right hand. Shukongojin's left hand with its two raised fingers forms a gesture, or **mudra**, which mimics a sword, an additional reminder of the deity's symbolic power. The third eye of the figure is related to the all-seeing eye of Buddha, which is common to Buddhist statuary and signifies **omnipotence**. Such indicators of Shukongojin's strength and abilities heighten his protective power and underscore his vital role in Buddhist practices of devotion and meditation.

While the Art Institute's figure of Shukongojin shares certain symbolic and iconographic features with Buddhist deities and figures from other parts of Asia, he also displays particularly Japanese traits. For example, the use of crystal for his eyes,

a practice called **gyokugan**, emerged in Japan in the 12th century and gives a more realistic appearance to his face. His squat proportions, bulbous facial features, and overly defined musculature are typical of many Buddhist sculptures in the Kamakura period, which are marked by heightened realism; there are even small hairs painted under his raised arm. Such exaggerated anatomy and animated features emphasize his otherworldly nature. **Yosegi-zukuri**, the construction method used for the figure, is also representative of its place of origin. Usually reserved for Buddhist figures, it is a traditional Japanese technique of joining wooden blocks together to create large-scale sculpture that is still used today. In 2007, the contemporary American artist Charles Ray commissioned a traditional Japanese woodcarving workshop to use yosegi-zukuri to create *Hinoki*, a 2100-pound sculpture of a fallen tree. Ray's use of hinoki, or Japanese cypress, for the sculpture underlies the importance of wood, which was prized not only for its durability but also its evocative fragrance throughout the history of Japanese Buddhist sculpture. On display in the contemporary art galleries of the Art Institute of Chicago, *Hinoki*, the first non-Buddhist work the workshop created, helps to forge links across the museum's collections.



Charles Ray. *Hinoki*, 2007. Through prior gifts of Mary and Leigh Block, Mr. and Mrs. Joel Starrels, Mrs. Gilbert W. Chapman, and Mr. and Mrs. Roy J. Friedman; restricted gift of Donna and Howard Stone.

Surviving images of Shukongojin are relatively rare. In fact, the Art Institute's Shukongojin, which came to the museum in 1958, when many American collections of Japanese art were being formed, is one of only a few figures of this type in an American museum. The oldest existing Shukongojin figure dates from the eighth century A.D.—early in Japan's Buddhist history—and is found at the Hokkedo, or Lotus Hall, at the **Todai-ji** temple in the city of Nara. A wide range of **hierarchically** arranged figures, situated at the altar at Hokkedo, represents deities from Hinduism and other religions that have been incorporated into Buddhism. The most humble among the figures—including Shukongojin—are the *kongojin* beings, who serve Buddhism as protectors and guardians. Being situated near the altar, the Shukongojin statue at Todai-ji plays a protective role to worshippers and a threatening role to entities that would do harm to the temple or its devotees. But unlike this eighth-century Shukongojin, wearing full armor and heavily influenced by the style of Chinese guardian figures, the Art Institute's

Shukongojin is nude from the waist up and represents the transition to the hyperrealism of the Kamakura period and unique developments within Japanese Buddhist sculpture.

Though we do not know the exact temple where this Shukongojin figure is from, certain visual clues might help us to better understand its broader historical context. It is very likely that the fierce facial features and threatening pose would have appealed to the emerging warrior class known as the samurai, who defined themselves by strict discipline and an imposing nature. The Kamakura Period in Japanese history began with the seizure of power from the imperial court by the future **shogun** Minamoto no Yoritomo in 1185 and the spread of his political control through the eastern seacoast. Yoritomo's institution of the *bakufu*, a military form of government that is often referred to in English as the **shogunate**, decentralized the power of the imperial court and saw the rise of the samurai as a political force.

The establishment of the shogunate also marked a shift in artistic taste. Instead of the refined and abstracted elegance preferred by the elite and intellectual classes of the previous **Heian** period (794–1185), the warrior patrons of the Kamakura period favored a different approach. The fierce, warrior-like imagery of guardian sculptures like Shukongojin not only protected the sacred space of Buddhist temples but also responded to the common concern with protecting property and private land at a time of increasing **Mongol** invasions across Asia. It is said that samurai were aided by the forceful winds of typhoons to defend Japanese shores from the Mongol army. Shukongojin's wind-blown hair and swirling garments evoke the effects of this rushing torrent of *kamikaze*, or “divine winds,” which were believed to have been sent by the gods. His rigid stance, rippling musculature, and violent gestures would have reflected the rigor and power of the samurai.

The Art Institute's figure of Shukongojin, with his demon-like body, flaring eyes, and mouth stretched in a scream, might have originally terrified an oncoming visitor to the temple he guarded, but might have also instilled a sense of protection and reassurance for the visitor who hoped nothing would disturb his meditations once inside. For the viewer today, Shukongojin looks down from his rock-like pedestal, imposing both a sense of awe and curiosity about the target of his aggressive presence.

Glossary

gyokugan: (Japanese) literally, “crystal eyes,” which were used in Japanese sculpture beginning in the 10th century

Heian period: A.D. 794–1185, marked by a flourishing of the imperial court and spread of Buddhism in Japan

hierarchical: of, relating to, or arranged as a body of persons or things ranked in grades, orders, or classes one above another

Historical Buddha Shakyamuni: a royal prince who became the Buddha, or “Enlightened One,” after sustained meditation and rejecting worldly pleasures and living a life of asceticism (abstinence and austerity)

icon: (Greek) literally, “image,” a venerated religious image used in liturgy or devotion

Kamakura Period: A.D. 1183–1333, marked by the rise in military government in medieval Japan; named for Kamakura, the new capital of the central government

Mongol invasions: forces led by Kublai Khan to conquer Japan in A.D. 1274 and 1281

mudra: (Sanskrit) any one of many symbolic hand gestures found in Buddhist art; also used in Hindu art

Muromachi period: A.D. 1392–1573, a time of social and political instability resulting from power struggles between the independent land owners (daimyo) and the central government, but like the Kamakura period the Muromachi period was a time of artistic innovation, including the culture of tea, Zen gardens, and *renga*, or collaborative poetry

nirvana: state of transcendental being and release from suffering and the endless cycles of death and rebirth, achieved by meditation and shedding of worldly concerns and materials; also referred to as enlightenment

omnipotence: the state of being all-seeing and all-knowing

pantheon: (Greek) literally “all the gods”; used to refer to a collective of gods in any religion

Sanskrit: the ancient and primary language of Hinduism and Buddhism, which originated on the Indian subcontinent

sects: distinctive groups within a religious or political system; there are many Buddhist sects in Japan, including Amida (Pure Land) and Zen Buddhism.

shogun: title given to military rulers in Japan

shogunate: known in Japan as the *bakufu*, the government of military rule

Todai-ji (“toe-dye-gee”): Buddhist temple complex in Nara, Japan, constructed in the 8th century A.D.; one of the earliest and most historically significant Buddhist temples in Japan or anywhere

vajra: (Sanskrit) literally “thunderbolt,” a tool that symbolizes an impenetrable and unbreakable force, materialized as a thunderbolt and represented in a form that looks like a dumbbell or a peg rounded at each end, as seen in the Art Institute’s figure of Shukongojin

yosegi-zukuri: (Japanese) technique of joining several pieces of wood together; traditionally used for Buddhist sculptures

Zen: (Japanese) from the Sanskrit *dhyana*, or meditation; refers to the Japanese sect of Buddhism that emphasizes the teacher-disciple relationship and meditation

Classroom Activities and Discussion Questions

Sleuthing Skills

Illinois Learning Standards: 5, 25, 27

Because the original location of the Art Institute's Shukongojin within the temple is not known, art historians have to rely on visual clues from the sculpture in order to create hypotheses. By looking carefully and examining every detail, consider the following questions in order to investigate the original placement and visual impact of Shukongojin.

1. Have students look at images and layouts of Japanese temples (see resources). Where do you think this sculpture might have been placed at the temple? Consider height, orientation, or even placement in relation to different structures within the temple.
2. Look carefully at the platform Shukongojin stands on. How would you describe the textures? What natural effects does it resemble?
3. Though the Art Institute's sculpture of Shukongojin stands in isolation, imagine that he's in a setting. What clues does the sculpture give as to the details of his surrounding? What might the rest of the landscape look like?
4. Shukongojin was originally painted a vibrant red, a color normally reserved in Japanese sculpture for demons. What effect might this have on the viewer? How might that effect change the overall sculpture if the paint were blue or yellow?
5. The artist(s) of Shukongojin imbued the figure with a lot of rhythm. How are certain lines and shapes repeated throughout the figure? How has the idea of movement been visually communicated?

Hero Worship

Illinois Learning Standards: 2

Have students think about those in their own experience who guard and protect. Discuss what characteristics or qualities define or identify a guardian. Are there personal heroes in their lives or guardians of a community? Compare and contrast with the protective features of Shukongojin.

Proportion Play

Illinois Learning Standards: 6, 7, 25, 26

The figure of Shukongojin has unusual proportions. Make copies of the poster of Shukongojin that accompanies this resource packet. Have students map the sculpture's proportions by exploring the relationship of different body parts to one another. For example, Shukongojin's torso from the collarbone to the groin is the equal to the length of the legs from the groin to ankle. Shukongojin's shins are very short, equaling the length of his face.

In the Italian Renaissance, artists like Leonardo da Vinci mapped the human body as eight "heads" tall, meaning that the height of the human body was equal to eight times the length of the skull. In the 20th century, modern artists experimented with this proportion to represent the human body in new ways.

Have students measure their bodies and make measurements from joints to joints or a combination of limbs. What measurements roughly equal each other? What relationships can be found?

Then experiment by adjusting the proportions. What happens if your shins were twice as long as your torso? Or if your arms were the same length as your face? Have students draw their creations!

Writing Waka

Illinois Learning Standards: 2, 3, 29

In medieval Japan, *waka*, a genre of classical Japanese poetry, enjoyed great popularity amongst courtly and samurai classes. In the Kamakura period, a type of collaborative poetry called *renga* developed out of *waka*. Each participant would contribute a stanza (or several) to the poem. Students might be familiar with the Japanese *haiku*, a three-line poem based on the number of syllables in each line, specifically 5-7-5. *Renga* consists of several stanzas alternating patterns of syllables: 5-7-5, 7-7, 5-7-5, 7-7, etc.

Divide students into groups of three. Have them take on the point of view of visitor to a temple and consider the visitor's encounter with Shukongojin. Have the first student write first stanza of 5-7-5. Pass it along to the second participant who will add a stanza of 7-7, the next student will contribute a third stanza of 5-7-5 and so on as time allows or until they come to a natural ending to the poem.

This activity can be adapted to change the number of students or group size.

Contemporary Japan

Illinois Learning Standards: 25, 27

Today, many American students are familiar with a style of Japanese animation called anime or *manga*. Originally in the form of comic books, anime plays a popular role in Japanese television and media. Much of the style of anime is indebted to historical images and statuary, such as the exaggerated facial features and strong lines that we see in Shukongojin. Have students select and research a manga comic book or anime movie or television show and describe the style of that particular animation in formal terms (color, line, perspective, shape, and/or space).

Are there parallels that can be visually found between the formal qualities of anime and historical Japanese works? Compare facial features, or details such as expression, eyes, hair and body movements between Shukongojin and the student's selected anime or manga.

Have students look at other Japanese works in the Art Institute's collection for further inspiration and then create their own new characters and story!

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Websites

Arts of the Samurai

Asian Art museum of San Francisco

www.asianart.org/educatorresources.htm

This downloadable teacher resource examines the samurai through precious art objects from the Asian Art Museum's collection. Subject areas include history, social sciences, and visual arts. Classroom activities geared to elementary through high school; adaptable for all ages."

Discovering Buddhist Art—Seeking the Sublime

Seattle Museum of Art

www.seattleartmuseum.org/exhibit/interactives/buddhism/launchWin.htm

A website featuring artworks from the permanent collection of the Seattle Art Museum.

About Japan: A Teacher's Resource

Japan Society

aboutjapan.japansociety.org/

This website features teaching ideas and resources for the K-12 classroom. Lesson plans and activities include teacher-generated content. Essays and resources range from historical to contemporary Japan with a focus on global issues.

Imaging Japanese History: Lesson Plans for High School

The Center for Asian Studies, University of Colorado

www.colorado.edu/cas/tea/curriculum/imaging-japanese-history/index.html

An online curriculum designed to enhance students' visual literacy skills, historical thinking skills, and knowledge of Japanese history. Five online modules provide a case study in the role of art in capturing and conveying human experience.

Sharing Haiku and Renga

www.renga-platform.co.uk

This resource on renga poetry may be helpful to consult for the writing waka activity.

Asian Historical Architecture

www.orientalarchitecture.com/index.php

A photographic survey of Asia's architectural heritage. View over 17,500 photos of 837 sites in 21 countries, with background information and virtual tours. Check out Kamakura, Japan, for images and descriptions of Buddhist temples in the area.

Japanese Architecture and Art Net Users System (JAANUS)

www.aisf.or.jp/~jaanus/

A searchable dictionary of art historical terms with original Japanese, translation, and explanation

Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History: Buddhism and Buddhist Art

Metropolitan Museum of Art

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Related Resources for Students

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David Stark, Interim Woman's Board Endowed Executive Director
Sarah Alvarez, Director Teacher Programs

Written by Terah Walkup

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