

# The Art of Pure Land Buddhism

In the latter part of the Heian period (794–1185) the Pure Land school of Buddhism became popular, particularly among aristocrats. This doctrine taught people the horrors of Buddhist hells and the glories of the Western Paradise of the Buddha Amitabha (Amida). To attain rebirth into this paradise in the next life, pious devotees did not have to perform complicated rituals or study Buddhist texts. They simply had to meditate and recite the prayer “Namu Amida Butsu,” or “I take my refuge in Amitabha Buddha.” This popular new religion led to a flurry of temple-building during the eleventh and twelfth centuries, which in turn led to great demand for sculptures of Amitabha. Sculpture workshops developed methods of mass-producing large statues, using prefabricated parts that were pegged and glued together in the technique known as assembled woodblock construction (*yosegi zukuri*).

Similarly, paintings depicting Amitabha and scenes of the Pure Land in the West were needed to accompany sermons and prayer. In the twelfth century, an enthusiastic cult grew up around a giant eighth-century tapestry depicting the Western Paradise. Countless copies of this “Taima mandala,” including the one shown here, were painted and distributed throughout Japan. Pure Land ideology was further manifested in the development of the so-called descent of Amitabha (*Amida raigo*) as a theme. In painting and sculpture, Amitabha is depicted in the act of descending to earth to welcome a dying person and to convey the deceased to the Western Paradise. Several sculptures of Amitabha are on display here, but to preserve the paintings, the museum limits their light exposure to several months’ display once every five years.



Taima Mandala, 1300–1400.



# The Art of Esoteric Buddhism

Esoteric Buddhism (*mikkyo*), a form of Buddhism related to the tantric Buddhism of the Himalayas, became increasingly popular in Japan beginning in the late eighth century. Esoteric Buddhism teaches that one may attain an enlightened state by meditating on images of certain buddhas and bodhisattvas and by performing mystic rituals, including chanting, in the presence of images.

Like the fierce Ragaraja (Aizen Myoo), shown nearby, the deities of esoteric Buddhism often have multiple faces, arms, or legs. These features symbolize the deities' supernatural powers and the duties they perform to protect Buddhist law and help humankind. The deities may also hold in their hands particular symbolic implements, such as a thunderbolt, lasso, or jewel. Examples of related bronze implements, used by priests in the course of esoteric rituals, are displayed in the case nearby.

Practitioners of esoteric Buddhism also hang elaborate paintings for worship at specified rituals. Some of these, like the pair shown to the right, are mandalas, maplike images of numerous deities arranged to display hierarchies and interrelationships in the divine cosmos. Mahavairocana (Dainichi), the sun buddha, the central deity of Japanese esoteric Buddhism, is situated in the top middle square of the Diamond World mandala (left) and at the center of the Womb World mandala (right).

*Note: These delicate paintings may not be on view, since we must limit their light exposure in order to preserve them.*



Mandalas of the Two Worlds (*Ryokai mandara*), approx. 1800–1868. Left: Diamond World; right: Womb World.

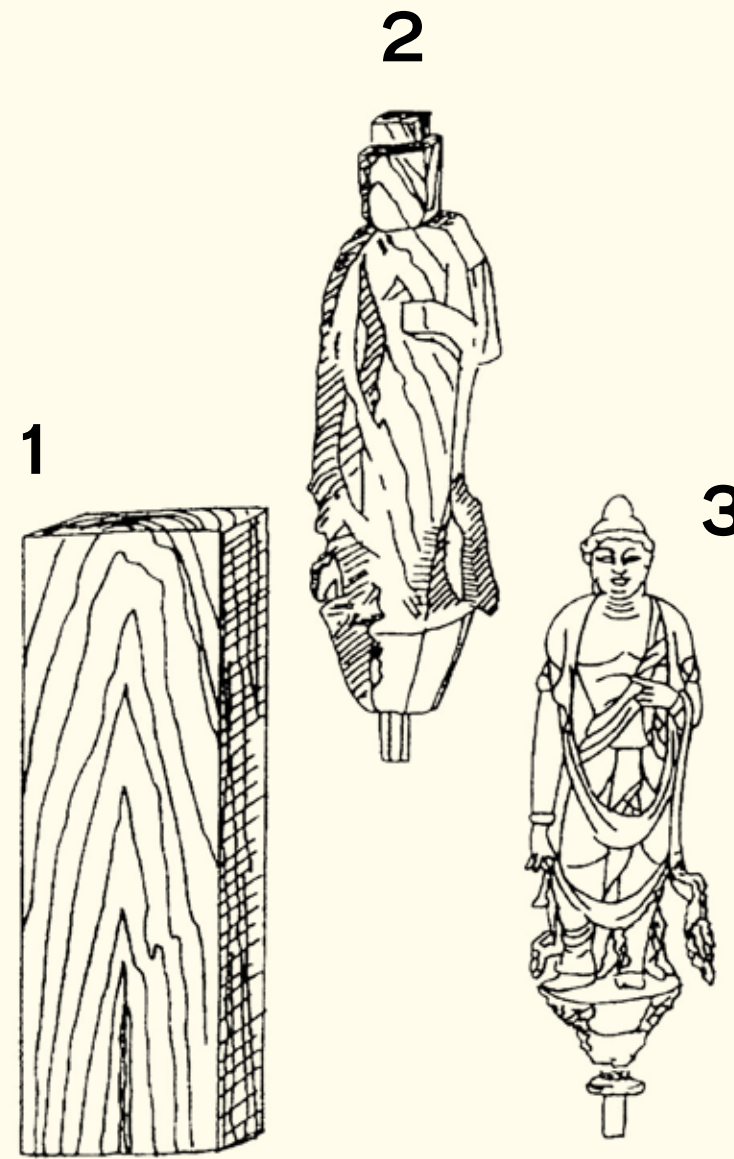
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# Japanese Wood Sculpture

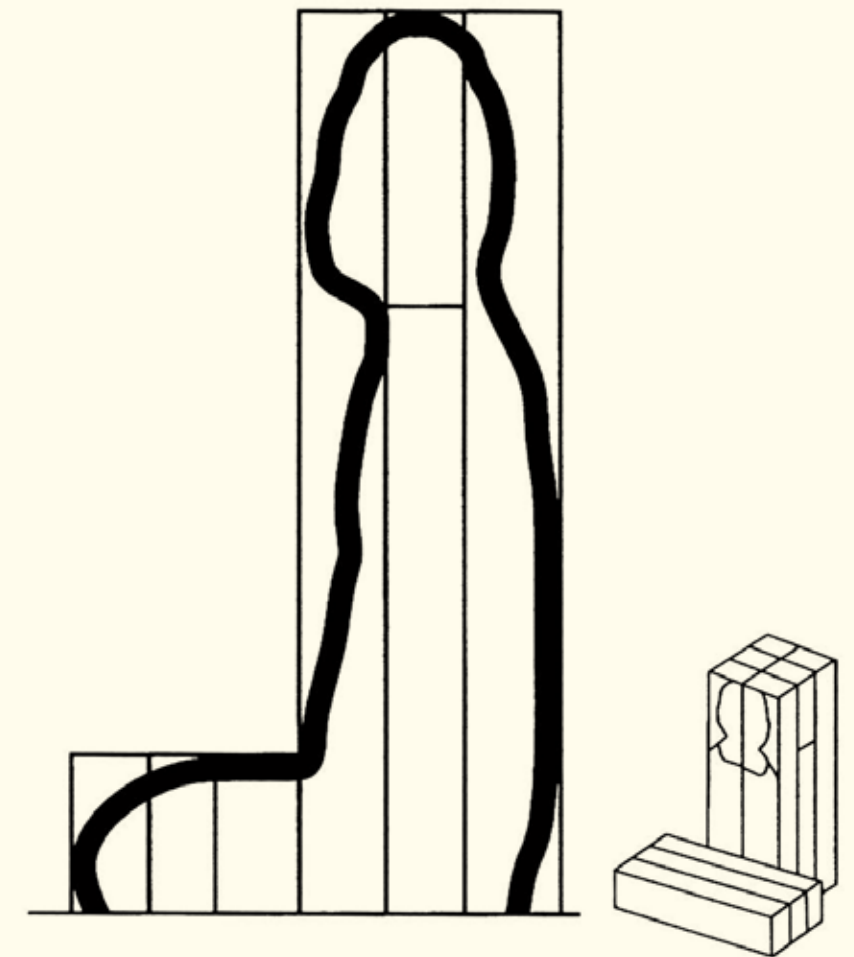
For centuries wood has been a primary material for Japanese Buddhist sculpture. Wood is plentiful in Japan, and sculptors have used a variety of types, among them Japanese cypress (hinoki) and a kind of Japanese elm (zelkova or keyaki). Early artists carved their works from a single block of wood, but beginning in the eleventh century a new technique of multiple-block assemblage (*yosegi zukuri*) made it possible to create larger images. In this process, artists shaped several blocks of wood individually, hollowed them out, and then assembled them into one large sculpture.

This multiple-block technique had several advantages: the sculpture was less likely to split because the wood core had been removed; because it used small pieces of wood, it required only a third of the wood demanded for single-block construction; and the work could be divided into specialized steps, each done by different groups of workers in a process similar to a factory assembly line.



## Single-Block Carving

1. Woodcutting: A block of appropriately sized wood is cut to make the sculpture.
2. Rough cut: The general form of the image is shaped with an axe.
3. Fine cut: The sculpture is given a definite shape and the surface is smoothed.



## Multiple-Block Carving

Multiple blocks of wood are joined in the approximate shape of the sculpture before carving.

*Kyotaro Nishakawa and Emily Sano, The Great Age of Japanese Buddhist Sculpture: AD 600–1300, 1982.*

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## Brahma and Indra in Buddhist Art

Brahma and Indra are Hindu deities who had been incorporated into Buddhism by the first century BCE (see the photo to the right for an example). In Nara-period (710–794) Japan, Brahma and Indra, known in Japan as Bonten and Taishakuten, were considered protective figures, part of the class of deities known as devas. Statues of the two deities were typically paired as attendants flanking a buddha or bodhisattva. The Asian Art Museum's Brahma and Indra are among the earliest Japanese images of these deities to have survived to the present day.

These nearly life-sized standing figures represent Brahma and Indra as young men. Their bearing is upright and focused; their slender bodies and rounded cheeks have a youthful quality. Brahma's and Indra's hands, now empty, probably once held symbolic attributes such as a scroll or lotus.

The close connections between court culture in Nara and in Tang-dynasty (618–907) China is reflected in the costumes of these statues. Brahma's costume, loosely modeled on the attire of high-ranking Tang-dynasty officials, consists of layered robes, full sleeves, and an ankle-length apron worn over a pleated skirt.

A Tang-style armored breastplate covers Indra's chest. In addition, he wears a monk's robe over a long-sleeved garment with a pleated skirt. Their shoes, modern replacements, have the upturned toes characteristic of the footwear worn by Tang officials. Details of their attire may have been based on iconographic drawings or statues imported from the continent.

Very few statues of Brahma and Indra survive from eighth-century Japan; other examples include a larger dry lacquer pair at Todaiji Temple, a pair of clay statues at Horyuji Temple, and pair of wooden statues at Toshodaiji Temple.



Indra and Brahma entreat the Buddha to preach, 50–100 CE. Pakistan; Swat Valley.

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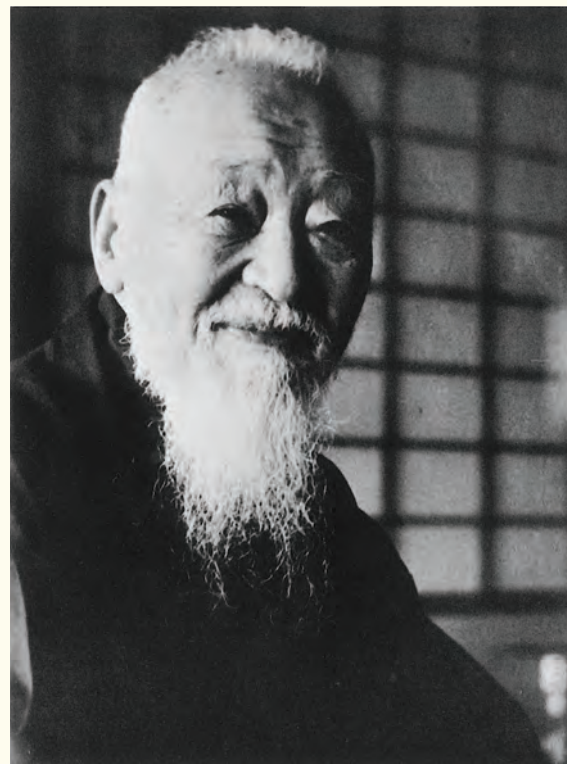


## From Temple to Museum

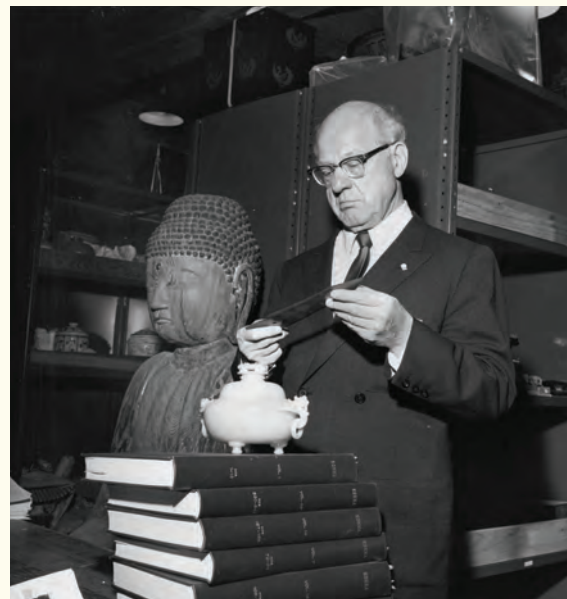
These sculptures of Brahma and Indra once belonged to Kofukuji, one of the oldest and most important Buddhist temples in Nara, Japan. They left the temple during the anti-Buddhist movement that arose after 1868, when the Meiji government separated Shinto and Buddhism—practices that had previously coexisted—into distinct religions. Between 1868 and 1874, tens of thousands of Buddhist temples were affected as land and property were seized or destroyed. In the wake of these events, many temples fell on hard times and ended up selling their treasures to private individuals.

During this period, Kofukuji suffered severe financial and physical damage. Although most of its buildings and treasures were returned to religious use by the 1890s, the temple found it necessary to sell a group of damaged sculptures to raise funds for building and artwork repairs. Documents from the time report that Masuda Eisaku (1865–1921) stepped in to purchase the entire group on behalf of his older brother, the wealthy industrialist and art collector Masuda Takashi (1848–1938). Most of the statues were subsequently sold or donated, and today many of these works belong to major museums, including the Nara National Museum; Miho Museum (Shiga); Nezu Museum (Tokyo); Cleveland Museum; Museum of Fine Arts, Boston; and Asian Art Museum of San Francisco.

Following the sale, Masuda Takashi sent the sculptures of Brahma and Indra for repairs to Niiro Chunosuke (1869–1954), an expert sculpture restorer who was one of the founders of the Japan Art Institute (Nihon Bijutsuin). The heads, hands, costumes, and shoes of both statues were all restored by Niiro using traditional methods, in a style consistent with other eighth-century sculptures. In 1927 Masuda displayed the statues at his villa Hekiundai, in Shinagawa, with a brochure describing Brahma and Indra as masterpieces of Nara-period sculpture that were likely once part of a larger group of hollow dry lacquer sculptures made for Kofukuji's West Golden Hall. Members of the Masuda family kept Brahma and Indra, the oldest statues from the Kofukuji sale, until the mid-1960s.



Masuda Takashi (1848–1938).



Avery Brundage (1887–1975) with artworks from his collection.

The next stage of Brahma and Indra's journey began in 1964, when the American collector Avery Brundage (1887–1975) was in Japan in his capacity as head of the International Olympic Committee. In the months leading up to the 1964 Tokyo Olympics, Brundage searched for a few more treasures to add to the collection he had donated to the Center of Asian Art and Culture (precursor of the Asian Art Museum), set to open in San Francisco in 1966. While in Japan in 1964, Brundage traveled to the Masuda family villa to see the two statues. He agreed to buy the statues for the museum, paying \$138,000, perhaps the largest amount he had ever spent on a single artwork purchase.

The Brahma and Indra sculptures were carefully packed and shipped to San Francisco, arriving just in time for the new museum's grand opening. Japan has strict laws regulating the export of important cultural properties, prompting at least one writer to speculate that the rules may have been relaxed in recognition of Brundage's contribution to US–Japan relations. Perhaps this story is true; Japan's high regard for Brundage was confirmed in 1972, when Emperor Hirohito (1901–1989) awarded him the Order of the Rising Sun, first class.

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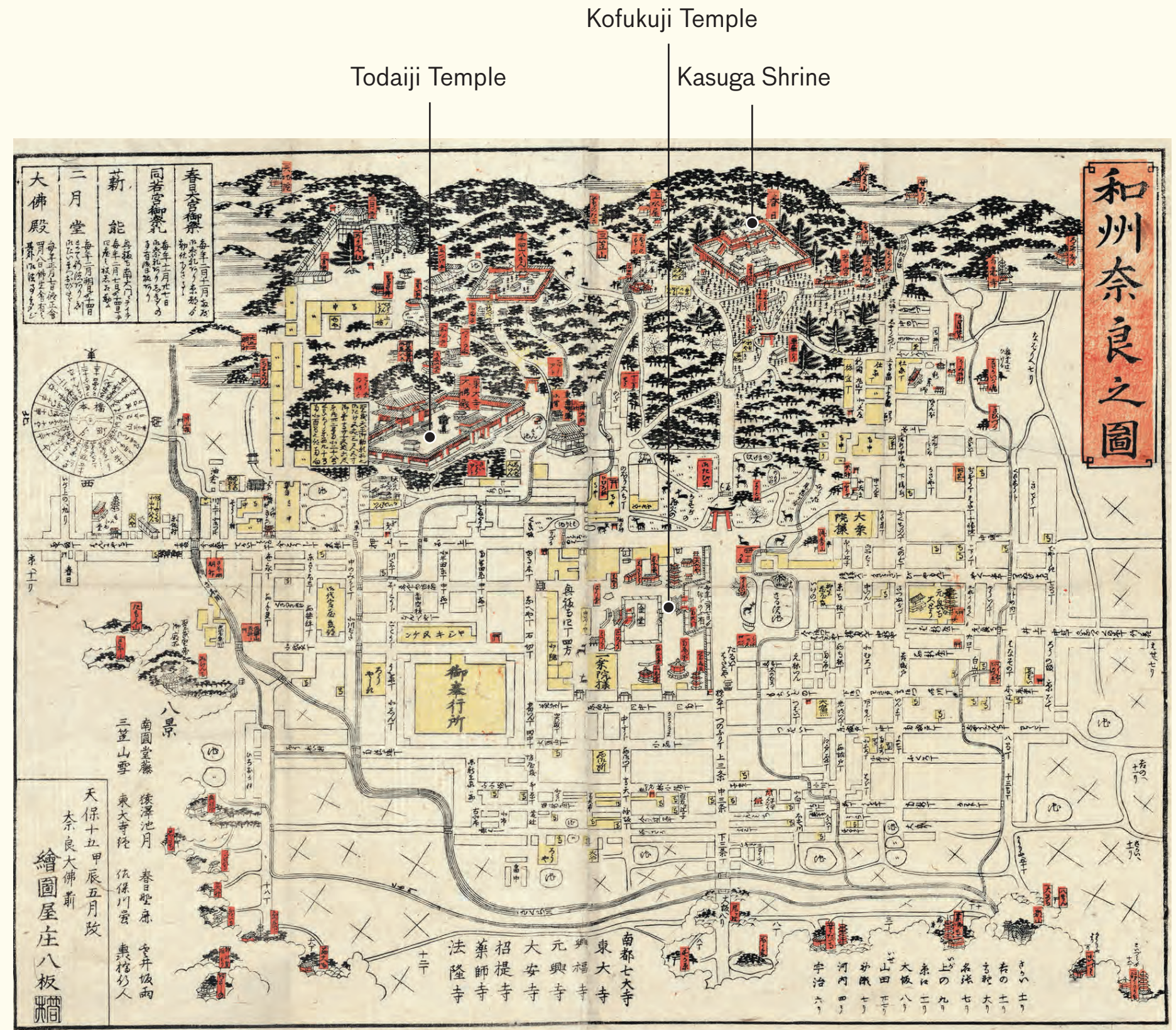


# Kofukuji Temple

Kofukuji Temple, which was once home to these sculptures of Brahma and Indra, was founded in 669 and moved to its present site on the eastern side of the city of Nara in 710. As shown in the nineteenth-century map to the right, the temple is adjacent to Nara's deer park and the path leading up the hillside to Kasuga Shrine.

From 710 until 794 Nara was Japan's capital and Kofukuji was a bustling religious center. During this period, the temple received generous support from the Fujiwara, a prominent aristocratic clan, and other noble families. Empress Komyo (701–760), a Fujiwara by birth, funded construction of the temple's West Golden Hall and an important set of dry lacquer sculptures, many of which survive at the temple today. Komyo was consort to Emperor Shomu (701–756), who commissioned the famous Great Buddha at Kofukuji's neighboring temple, Todaiji. Like the Great Buddha, the statuary made for Kofukuji in the eighth century employed the most up-to-date methods and styles from China.

Though Kofukuji fell on hard times during the eighteenth century, when a fire ravaged the complex, and suffered during a period of anti-Buddhist sentiment in the late 1800s, it has sustained itself to the present day and continues to be an active center for Buddhist worship. See the nearby video for more about Kofukuji's long history.



Map of Nara in Yamato Province, dated 1845. [Nara Chronicles website](#).

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## Hollow Dry Lacquer Sculptures at Kofukuji

These statues of Brahma and Indra are related in style and technique to a famous group of dry lacquer sculptures made for Kofukuji Temple in the early 730s (two examples are shown to the right). Scholars believe that the fourteen sculptures preserved today at the temple were part of a large set commissioned by Empress Komyo in 733 in memory of her deceased mother. Those statues were originally housed in the temple's West Golden Hall, along with statues of Brahma, Indra, and a seated Buddha. Historical records indicate that images of Brahma and Indra were installed at both the West Golden Hall and the East Golden Hall at Kofukuji.

Some scholars have argued that the Asian Art Museum's representations of Brahma and Indra, which are similar in size and proportions, once belonged to the West Golden Hall group. Other scholars point to details like the shape of the ears and the folds of Brahma's sash as evidence that they were made somewhat later than that. Current scholarly consensus dates the Asian Art Museum statues to the mid-eighth century based on similarities to several sculptures—including a large pair of dry lacquer statues of Brahma and Indra—housed in the Lotus Hall (Hokkedo) at Todaiji Temple in Nara.



Asura (Ashura), approx. 734. *Kofukuji*.



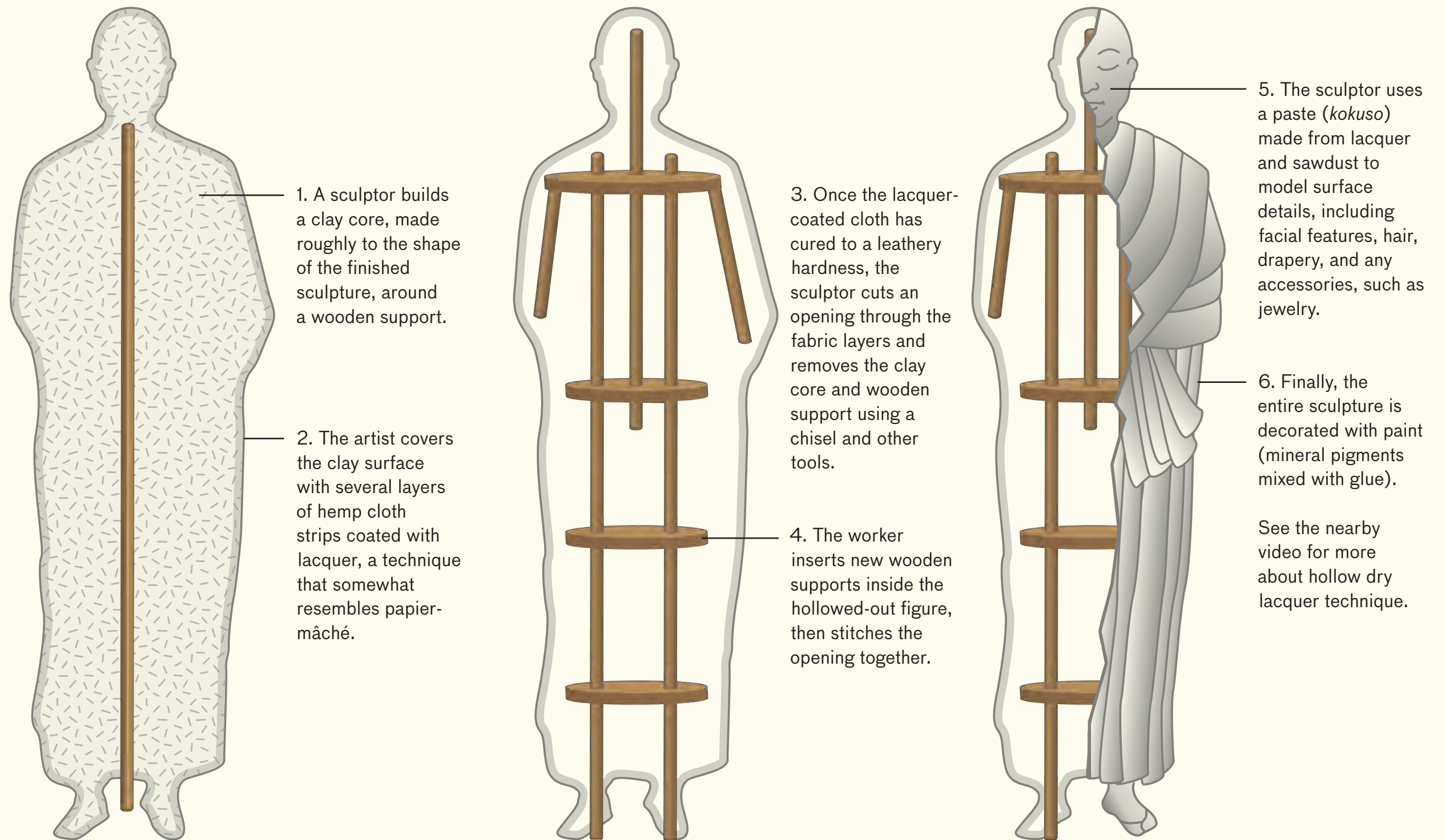
Gandharva (Kendatsuba), approx. 734. *Kofukuji*.

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# The Hollow Dry Lacquer Technique

These sculptures of Brahma and Indra belong to a small group of surviving eighth-century works made using the hollow dry lacquer, or *dakkatsu kanshitsu*, method. Brought to Japan by artisans from the continent in the seventh century, hollow dry lacquer enabled sculptors to create lightweight icons that are pest resistant and impervious to water. Unlike large icons made of bronze or wood, hollow dry lacquer statues could easily be lifted and carried out of a temple hall during a fire—a common hazard for temples constructed of wood. Despite these advantages, the hollow dry lacquer method was abandoned in Japan within a hundred years of its adoption. In all, only about fifty eighth-century hollow dry lacquer statues survive today, and very few exist outside Japan.

Making a hollow dry lacquer sculpture involves several steps:



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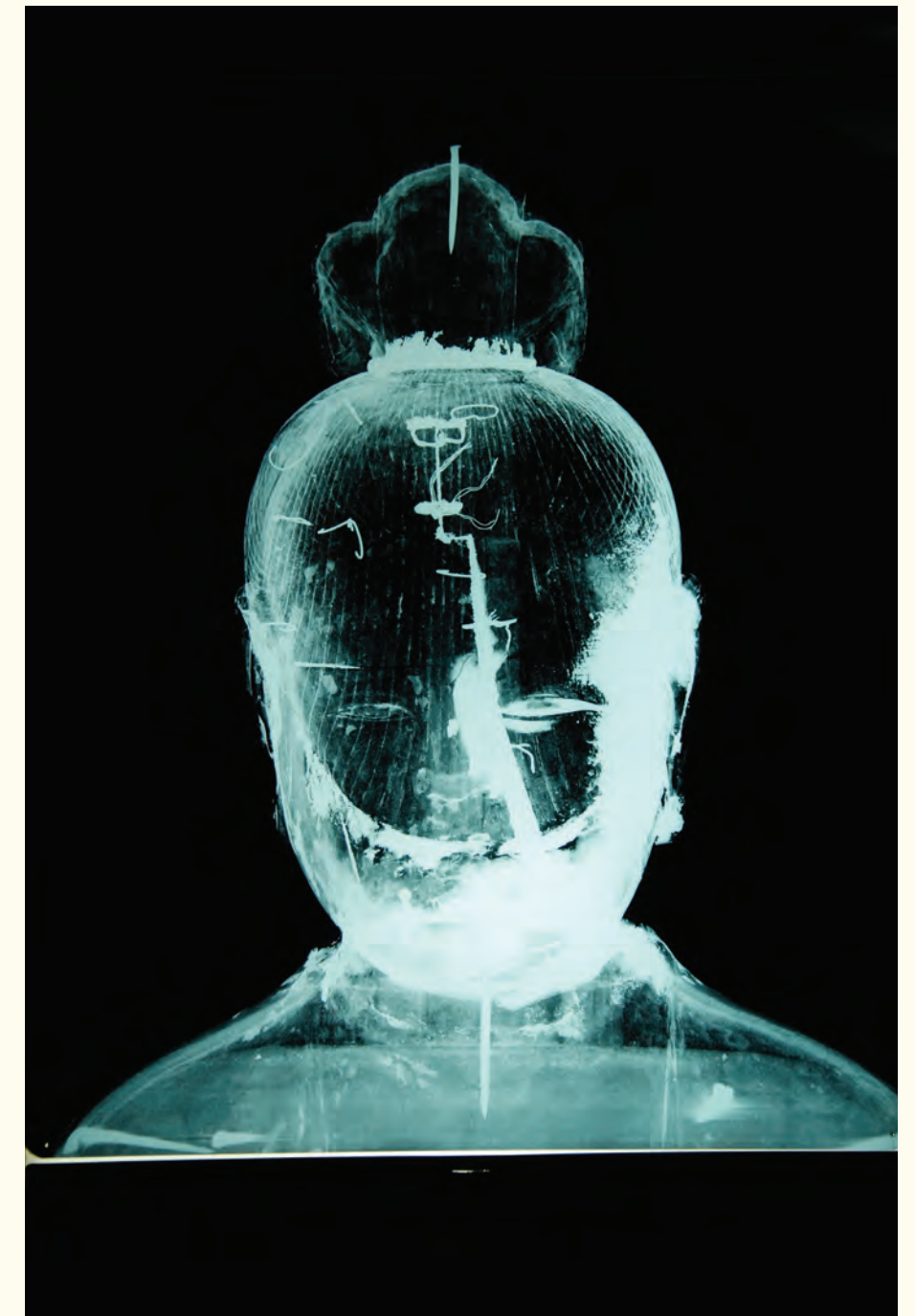
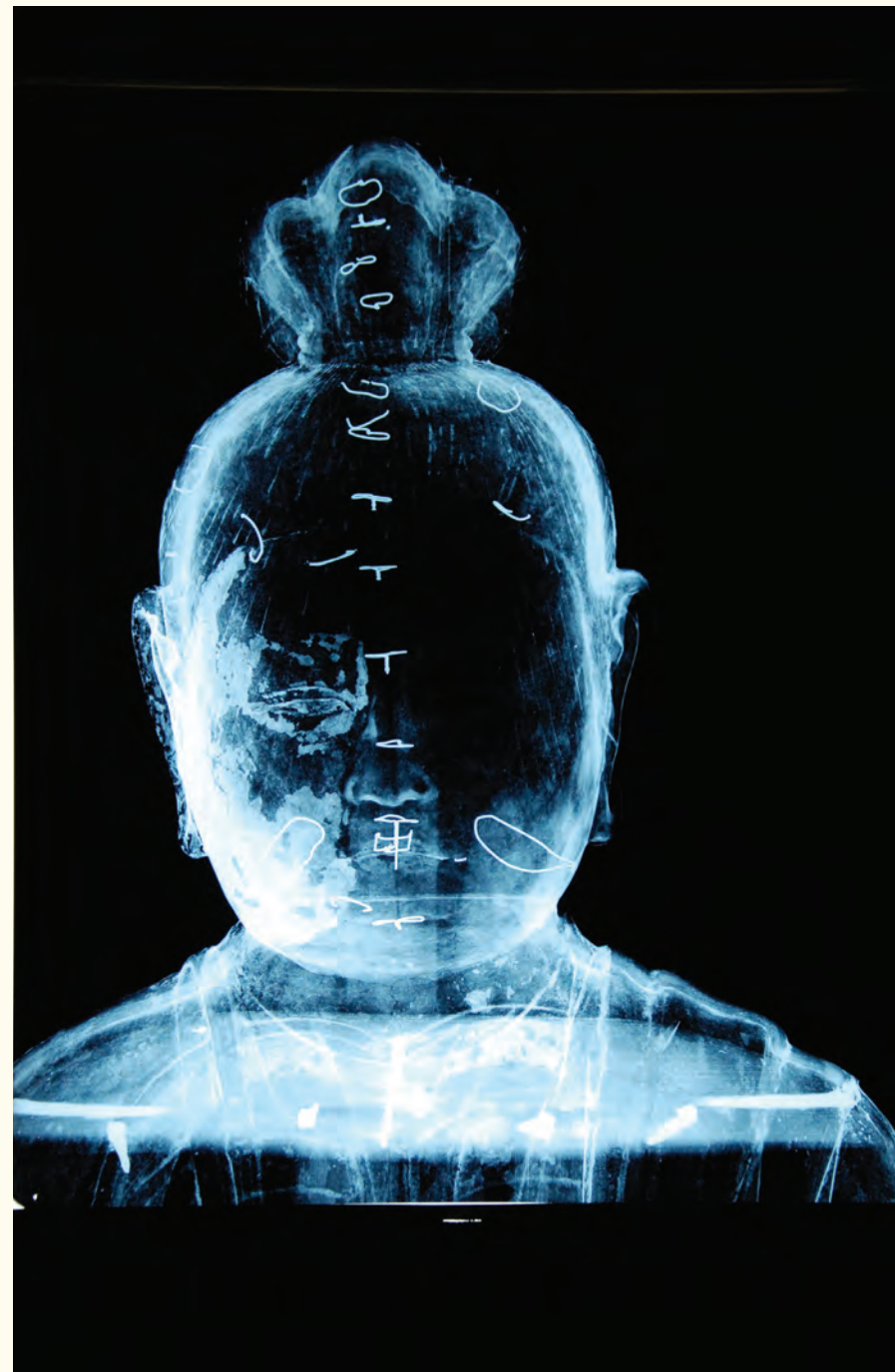


## A Restoration Project

The museum's statues of Brahma and Indra are 1,300 years old. There are no records to tell us what happened to them, but sometime over the centuries both images were heavily damaged. The photograph on the wall shows that by 1906 part of Brahma's head, Indra's head, and both statues' hands were missing and the edges of their sleeves and skirts were also damaged. We know from later documents that, soon after 1906, Niiro Chunosuke (1869–1954), a prominent restorer well versed in the styles and techniques of Nara-period sculpture, set to work repairing the statues. Niiro began repairing Buddhist sculptures in 1897, when the Japanese government enacted a law to preserve Shinto shrines and Buddhist temples. He had already repaired statues at several major temples in Nara when he undertook this project.

Niiro carefully restored the heads and costumes of the Brahma and Indra sculptures using lacquer-coated hemp and a fine paste of sawdust and lacquer—techniques consistent with those used to make hollow dry lacquer in the eighth century. X-rays reveal a variety of metal fasteners used during the repairs, most notably small metal clips that secured the two sides of each head at the back and large nails inserted through Brahma's topknot and neck to attach his head to the internal wood support.

One theory holds that the statues' heads were restored using fragments that were separated from the body, then preserved elsewhere at the temple, but this point is still open to debate. The feet and pedestals on both figures and the hands of Indra are made of wood, likely carved in the early 1900s. However, Bonten's hands are dry lacquer with metal supports, which might indicate that they were made in the eighth century. The restored statues are captured in their present state in a photo dated to 1927, indicating that the repairs had been completed by then.



X-ray photographs of the heads of Indra (Taishakuten) and Brahma (Bonten) sculptures.

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