



Head of a male Shinto deity

On display

Title/Description: Head of a male Shinto deity

Object Type: Figure, Head

Materials: Lacquer, Wood

Measurements: h. 275 x w. 130 x d. 170 mm

Accession Number: 956

Historic Period: Heian period (Late) (AD 897-1185)

Production Place: Asia, East Asia, Japan

Shinto deities were rarely represented in art until the foreign Buddhist faith, first introduced in the sixth century, gradually began to stimulate the rival production of paintings and images. Imagery, however, never became a dominant aspect of Shinto worship. The carvers of wooden figures of the Shinto deities (*kami*) drew on two visual traditions, one based on Buddhist types and the other on portraits of courtiers. Noble families sometimes traced their descent to *kami*, and therefore the deities could be represented in court dress, as in this piece, with its easily recognisable (though slightly damaged) court cap. Traces of his dress can also be seen around the neck. Because of the lack of iconography, pieces of this sort are very difficult to identify.

This head is almost certainly from a figure squatting in Japanese style on the floor. It is carved from a single block of wood and the back still shows quite wide score marks from the chisel or adze. The makers of Shinto figures were rarely the professional craftsmen who made Buddhist sculpture, and their technique represents an early type of folk-tradition which continued to exist in more popular form in local sculpture up to the nineteenth century. A broadly similar piece (not the same deity) is illustrated in Sasaki and Okumura (1979:148, no. 49).

Entry taken from Robert and Lisa Sainsbury Collection 3 volume catalogue, edited by Steven Hooper (Yale University Press, 1997).

Provenance

Formerly in the collection of Mitsuru Tajima (Sugimoto, 1987: no. 7, where a 10th – 11th century date is given).
