



Heian Buddha, Dainichi-Nyorai: Kakebotoke

Not on display

Title/Description: Heian Buddha, Dainichi-Nyorai: Kakebotoke

Object Type: Sculpture

Materials: Metal

Measurements: h. 113 x d. 75 x w. 30 mm

Accession Number: 1209

Historic Period: Later Heian Period (11-12th century)

Production Place: Asia, East Asia, Japan

This small moulded icon depicts Dainichi Nyorai, the Great Sun Buddha (Skt: Vairochana) seated cross-legged on a lotus throne. Also known as the Cosmic Buddha, Dainichi Nyorai was worshipped as the central deity within esoteric Buddhist traditions from the Heian period (794–1192 CE) onwards.

Dainichi Nyorai is conventionally shown wearing a tall crown and making the 'Mudra of Six Elements' or 'Knowledge Fist Mudra' (J. *chiken-in*). This hand gesture, in which the index finger of the left hand is clasped by the five fingers of the right, symbolises the unity of spiritual consciousness with the five elements – earth, water, fire, air/wind, and space/void. [1] Another interpretation, equates the left hand with the male sex organ and right hand with the female sex organ. This sexual symbolism emphasises Dainichi Nyorai's significance as the main deity, from which all other deities emanate. [2]

Dainichi Nyorai's face is finely modelled and engraved to convey a serious, naturalistic expression. The deity's generous and symmetrical features are set within a rounded face that has a softness of appearance. The three fleshy rings at the neck are one of the many auspicious marks (Skt. *lakshanas*) traditionally used to symbolise the Buddha's high moral attitude and conduct. The deity's body, clothed in the folded, contours of a monastic robe, is modestly unadorned with jewels.

Hollow-cast in bronze, this figure is believed to be one component of a disc-shaped votive, known as a *kakebotoke* 掛け佛 (‘hanging Buddhist deity’) or *mishōtai* 真像 (‘the true form of the deity’). [3] *Kakebotoke* depict Buddhist and Shinto deities within a round or oval frame fitted with suspension hooks for display within or outside a temple or shrine. [4]

During the late Heian and early Kamakura (1185–1333) periods, support grew for a new syncretism that melded Shinto and Buddhist beliefs (this later came to be known as *shinbutsu shūgō* 神仏習合). Fundamental to this belief was the concept of *honji suijaku* 本起随教, which regarded Japan's native gods (J. *kami*) as emanations of buddhas and bodhisattvas.

In Shinto, mirrors are perceived as embodiments of native gods or kami and are displayed in shrines or offered in acts of devotion. *Kakebotoke* may have evolved from these early engraved and painted mirrors (J. *kyōzō* 鏡). [5] Functioning in a similar way to *kyōzō*, *kakebotoke* depicting Buddhist deities were suspended from columns or placed on stands in front of a devotional image within shrines and temples. [6] The buddha or bodhisattva depicted on the plaque was to be worshipped as the original substance (*honji*) of corresponding Shinto gods. [7] By the Kamakura period, the *kakebotoke*'s low-relief, repoussée designs had become more three-dimensional, incorporating cast components that allowed the work to be viewed in the round.

There are very few examples of *kakebotoke* in museums in the United Kingdom; however, this small cast of Dainichi Nyorai resembles two items in the Tokyo Metropolitan Museum [8]. It is also possible that this high relief cast may once have been attached to the smooth side of a bronze mirror, as with the example at Kyoto Museum. [9]

Vanessa Tothill, June 2022

[1] <https://www.onmarkproductions.com/html/mudra-japan.shtml>

[Accessed 6 February 2023]

[2] <https://www.aisf.or.jp/~jaanus/deta/c/chikenin.htm>

[Accessed 6 February 2023]

[3] Mimi Yiengpruksawan 'In My Image. The Ichiji Kinrin Statue at Chūsonji' *Monumenta Nipponica*, Autumn, 1991, Vol. 46, No. 3 (Autumn, 1991), pp. 329-347, (p. 336, f.n. 45)

[4] Yiengpruksawan, p. 336, f.n.45.

[5] Michael Goedhuis (ed), *One Thousand Years of Art in Japan* (London and Bradford: Lund Humphries, Colnaghi Oriental in association with Shirley Day Ltd., 1981) pp. 18-19.

Examples of *kyōzō* can be viewed at Nara Museum:

<https://www.narahaku.go.jp/english/collection/493-23.html>

[Accessed 6 February 2023]

[6] Caroline Schulten, 'Some Notes on the Use of Bronze Mirrors in the Tomb of Zhang Wenzao, Liao Period' (*Cleveland Studies in the History of Art*, 2005, Vol. 9, 'Clarity and Luster: New Light on Bronze Mirrors in Tang and Post-Tang Dynasty China, 600-1300: Papers from a Symposium on the Carter Collection of Chinese Bronze Mirrors at the Cleveland Museum of Art' (2005), pp.68-89 (p. 88; f.n. 59).

[7] Goedhuis, pp. 18-19.

[8] See Tokyo Metropolitan Museum, object numbers E-14506 and E-14505

<https://webarchives.tnm.jp/imgsearch/show/E0069388>

<https://webarchives.tnm.jp/imgsearch/show/E0069386> [Accessed 1 June 2022]

[9] See Kyoto Museum, object number: E17-35

https://colbase.nich.go.jp/collection_items/kyohaku/E%E7%94%B217-35?locale=ja [Accessed 6 February, 2023]

Further Reading

Blair, Heather, 'Zaō Gongen: From Mountain Icon to National Treasure', *Monumenta Nipponica*, 2011, Col. 66, No. 1 (2011), pp. 1-47.

Ford, Barbara Brennan, 'The Arts of Japan', *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin*, Summer, 1987, New Series, Vol. 45, No.1 (Summer, 1987), pp. 1-56 (p. 21, no. 30).

Schulten, Caroline, 'Some Notes on the Use of Bronze Mirrors in the Tomb of Zhang Wenzao, Liao Period' (*Cleveland Studies in the History of Art*, 2005, Vol. 9, 'Clarity and Luster: New Light on Bronze Mirrors in Tang and Post-Tang Dynasty China, 600-1300: Papers from a Symposium on the Carter Collection of Chinese Bronze Mirrors at the Cleveland Museum of Art' (2005), pp.68-89 (p. 88, Fn. 59)

Sugiyama Hiroshi, "Kodai no kagami" [Ancient mirrors], *Nihon no bijustu* Vol. 393 (1999), pp. 70-73.'

Yiengpruksawan, Mimi 'In My Image. The Ichiji Kinrin Statue at Chūsonji' *Monumenta Nipponica*, Autumn, 1991, Vol. 46, No. 3 (Autumn, 1991), pp. 329-347, (p. 336, f.n.45)
