

9 / [Portraits](#)



Artist / Origin Kosho (Japan, active late 12th-early 13th century)
Region: [East Asia](#)

Date Kamakura Period, early 13th century
Period: [1000 CE - 1400 CE](#)

Material Wood
Medium: [Sculpture](#)

Dimensions H: 46 in. (117 cm.)

Location Rokuharamitsuji Temple, Kyoto, Japan

expert perspective

[Yoshiaki Shimizu](#) Professor of Art and Archeology, Princeton University

Additional Resources

Mason, Penelope. *History of Japanese Art*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2004.

Mori, Hisashi, and W. Chie Ishabashi. *Japanese Portrait Sculpture*. New York: Kodansha America, 1977.

Kuya-Shonin (Saint Kuya)

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Created by the thirteenth-century Japanese sculptor Kosho, *St. Kuya* displays a strikingly realistic style that is believed to have originated with the artist's father, Unkei, and is characteristic of early Kamakura sculpture.

In its original state, the naturalism of the carved figure would have been enhanced by paint and inset crystal eyes. Although the specificity of this sculpture's features suggests the likeness of an individual, the work is a posthumous portrait, created some two hundred years after the subject's death.

Housed in the Rokuharamitsuji temple in Kyoto, *St. Kuya* commemorates the temple's legendary founder Kuya-Shonin (also known as Kuuya Shoonin), a tenth-century itinerant Buddhist priest. It is believed that Kuya established the temple in 951 and dedicated it to the goddess of healing in hopes of securing her assistance against an epidemic that was sweeping across the region. In addition to his role in the temple's founding, Kuya was an important forerunner of the Jodo, or Pure Land, sect of Buddhism that emerged in Japan in the late twelfth century.

Following the philosophy of the seventh-century Chinese priest Shan-tao, Kuya and others taught that birth in the Pure Land, or Western Paradise, of the Amida Buddha could be achieved simply through faith and the recitation of the *nembutsu*, or name of Amida. Kosho's *St. Kuya* shows the holy man in the act of recitation. In striking contrast to the realistic figural representation, the artist has added a more conceptual element to the work. The syllables of the *nembutsu*—*namu Amida butsu* (meaning "Praise to Amida Buddha")—are given physical substance in form of six small buddhas that emerge from the statue's mouth. Paradoxically, the contemporary viewer would have identified the figure not by his carefully rendered face (which could not have been based on Kuya's actual features), but by the presence of these visualized syllables, along with his traveling attire and gong. In the context of the temple, the manifestation of the recitation serves other purposes as well. It both attests to Kuya's own salvation and acts as a model for temple worshippers, allowing the saint to continue teaching even in death.

Compare



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