



## **Female Shinto Deity**

---

**On display**

**Title/Description:** Female Shinto Deity

**Object Type:** Figure

**Materials:** Prunus, White Plaster

**Technique:** Ichiboko-Zukuri (single block carving)

**Measurements:** h. 940 mm

**Accession Number:** 1146

**Historic Period:** Kamakura period (AD 1185-1333)

**Production Place:** Asia, East Asia, Japan

**Credit Line:** Purchased with support of the Robert and Lisa Sainsbury Charitable Trust, 1997

---

Originally, Shinto *kami* (Japanese deities or spirits) were not represented in human form as they were rather associated with natural phenomena or sacred objects. However, the strong influence of Buddhism introduced the anthropomorphic depiction of them, which we can trace starting from the Heian period. [1]

So how can we indicate that this is a deity and not a statue of a particular person? This statue dates to the Kamakura period, when people were portrayed incredibly realistically, especially in Nara. [2] The Shinto deity has rather smooth, non-distinctive facial features. The clothes and pose are also neutral, offering no hints to a social status or a lifestyle. The peacefulness of her face aligns with the Buddhist tradition of depicting gods, which is not unconventional: the new and the Indigenous religions in Japan had been intertwining with each other since the Heian period. [3] For instance, Shinto shrines could be found within Buddhist monasteries, and Buddhist and Shinto gods could be worshipped alongside each other. Shinto deities, even though embodied in the human-shaped statue, nevertheless were not supposed to be openly displayed. Presumably, this female Shinto figure was not demonstrated to the public in the shrine, but was kept in the moveable shrine cabinet to be privately worshipped. [4]

Rada Brakhman, April 2023

[1] Penelope Mason, *History of Japanese art*, ed. Julia Moore (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., Publishers, 1993), p. 145.

[2] Another example of this would be the Priest Shunjobo Chogen statue, in Mason (1993), p. 149.

[3] Joan Stanley-Baker, *Japanese Art* (Thames & Hudson Ltd, London, 2014), p. 66.

[4] <https://www.khanacademy.org/humanities/art-asia/art-japan/heian-period/a/female-shinto-spirit>  
[Accessed 4 April 2023]

TO-BE-REPLACED-WITH-A-GAP

This single block carving from polychrome wood shows a slender female form. The carving highlights her long flowing robes, with long sleeves that cover the hands, but which appear clasped at the waist. The robe also covers her feet. The eyes are closed, and she shows a strong aquiline nose, with small rosebud lips. There is some blackening round the head and the top of the shoulders. This figure is very slender when seen in profile. There appears some termite/insect damage to the rear and the wood is cracked on the face and the left side of the torso. This figure is very smooth in appearance and the only carver's marks are evident on the head and three prominent gauges at the rear of the head.

Helen Coleman, 1997

TO-BE-REPLACED-WITH-A-GAP

Contemporary Japanese society continues to be strongly influenced by two ancient belief systems which have co-existed for hundreds of years: Buddhism, which came from China in the sixth century and assumed a particular Japanese character, and Shinto, which goes back even further and is local in origin.

There are many magnificent statues of Buddha, created in a variety of poses and materials in temples and homes across Japan. Shinto sacred images are much rarer and generally found in the inner sanctuary of shrines, and have been influenced by centuries of contact with representational Buddhist art.

This female Shinto deity, purchased by the Sainsburys in 1997 and carved from a single piece of camphor wood, dates from the medieval period, c.1185–1333. Faint traces of colour can still be detected on the statue, which was probably covered in white paste and then painted, creating a polychrome effect.

The powerful presence of this beautiful carving is complemented in the collection by the head of a male Shinto deity, which the Sainsburys had acquired ten years earlier. It too is carved from a single block of wood and possesses a brooding quietude, resonant of the Buddhist tradition that inspired the Shinto sculptural craftsmen.

There is little Shinto iconography, so it is difficult to identify which deities are represented by these carvings.

To a non-Japanese observer the female deity is remote, self-contained, lost not in isolation but in calm contemplation. The exquisite simplicity of the smooth drapery carving, sharply highlighting the sleeves then softly flowing down to the ground unbroken by any pleating, conveys a powerful aura of stillness and peace.

However pressed for time I may be on a visit to the Sainsbury Centre, I always try to find a few minutes to stand in front of this statue with its unique emanation of the meditative spirit.

—

Elizabeth Esteve-Coll, Sainsbury Centre Trustee, Former Director, V&A

---

---

---

## **Provenance**

Purchased by the Sainsbury Centre, University of East Anglia from Leighton R. Longhi Oriental Fine Arts in 1997. Purchased on the advice of Robert Sainsbury out of funds provided by the Robert and Lisa Sainsbury Charitable Trust.

---