

**11 Headed Kannon**  
**Yuji Honbori, b 1958**

**Information from Ginny Wheeler** - gathered from Wikipedia, Matthew Welch, Mary Grau, and a variety in internet sources.



**L2012.86.a,b**  
**Cardboard, wood, plastic**  
**Provenance: (Nanzuka Gallery, Tokyo); artist**

Statues of Buddhas have been objects of veneration for years.

**Modern Art is Rubbish!**

One man's trash is another man's treasure.

**Creative process**

- drawing
- tracing on cardboard
- cutting and putting together
- words make it a bit more colorful
- when they are lit up they really shine through

**Yuji Bonhori** holds a fine arts degree from Aichi Prefectural University of Arts and Music. Trained as a sculptor, he has always been interested in using discarded materials in order to make his work. His first sculptures were small portable shrines (zushi) that he fashioned from old wood he discovered from the rebuilding of a Shinto Shrine.

He first began experimenting with cardboard from discarded boxes (fruit and vegetable crates from his local grocery store) in 2004. He soon became fascinated with the gossamer quality of the cardboard as viewed through the corrugation. He realized that this quality could suggest the Buddhist notions of impermanence and ephemerality. For the last few years, he has been producing life-sized works in cardboard based on famous historic Buddhist sculptures. The proposed piece is based on an 8<sup>th</sup> century sculpture in the collection of Shorinji Temple in Nara.

The eleven-headed form of the bodhisattva Kannon was one of the first deities of Esoteric Buddhism to be worshiped in Japan. The name derives from the heads that adorn the deity's crown. Ten of the eleven heads are in the form of bodhisattvas. The eleventh, the topmost, is that of Amida (Sanskrit: Amitâbha), the Buddha of which Kannon is considered an emanation. The eleven heads symbolize Kannon's ability to see suffering in all corners of the universe and respond with compassion to those in need.

The MIA's **Eleven-Headed Kannon** at first appears to be made from some sort of metallic material. If you stand behind the Eleven-Headed Kannon and look through it into the Target Rotunda, it will appear to be made of chain metal. But when you approach the sculpture, you soon realize that it undoubtedly is much lighter than it first appears. The Kobe-based artist sculpts them from discarded cardboard (fruit and vegetable crates from his local grocery store) that is on its way to the garbage bin. Snatching them from their destiny, Honburi meticulously transforms them into venerable objects of worship.

**Welcome to Junk Culture:** British art critic Lawrence Alloway first coined the term "Junk Culture" to describe mixed-media work that rescues the throw-away products of modern life.

Honburi has always been interested in recycled materials, but not in a devotional way. He got his start making large-scale sculptures out of wood from demolished houses. But it wasn't until 8 years ago when he was working with wood from a demolished temple that he got the idea. He began experimenting with cardboard in 2004 and soon became fascinated with the gossamer quality of the cardboard as viewed through the corrugation. He realized that this quality could suggest the Buddhist notions of impermanence and ephemerality.

It's interesting to think about how art is moving toward repurposing materials rather than using new ones. The image of the Buddha, whose teachings often hinge on the idea of impermanence, is a fitting one for exploring materials that once belonged to something else and are being transformed into another.

And since then he's been fascinated with how one man's trash can be another man's treasure. His work was most recently part of the Hong Kong International Art Fair, as well as Art Fair Tokyo.

For the past 6 years, Yuji Honburi has been making Buddha's from recycled materials. He feels that it is imperative that the world embraces the idea of recycling. In Japan, it is said that "One can throw away paper, another man can pick up a god."

## The Inspiration:



Eleven-Faced Kannon  
Nara period  
Height 209 cm  
Shorinji Temple, Nara Prefecture

The Eleven-Faced Kannon is well-proportioned, and the representation of the garments is easy and refined. The small faces attached to the head are very precisely executed, some showing expressions of compassion and some showing expressions of wrath. Some of the petals of the lotus pedestal have been repaired over the years. The halo behind the head, which has an embossed lotus-flower design, was damaged and remains only in fragments.

Kannon personifies compassion and is one of the most widely worshipped divinities in Asia and Japan in both ancient and modern times. Kannon's origins are unclear, but most scholars agree that Kannon worship began in India around the 1st or 2nd century AD and then spread to Southeast Asia, China, Korea, and most other Asian nations. Veneration of Kannon in Japan began in the late 6th century, soon after Buddhism reached Japan by way of Korea and China. In Japan, Kannon's paradise is known as **Fudarakusen**.

### Physical Description:

The MIA's **11 Headed Kannon** is slightly smaller than life-size sculpture of a standing figure with elongated earlobes. It is wearing a crown and a garment with draping elements on its sleeves and skirts. It is standing on a small rounded platform and holding a flower bouquet in its left hand, the top is removable. The sculpture is made up of vertical pieces of brightly-colored corrugated cardboard. A thin yellow ring can be found at the upper back of the figure's interior.

### A study in contrasts:

The sculpture reveals a relationship between the weightiness of the past and the an ethereal lightness of the present. Walk around the statue: It is all at once weightless and heavy, changing and static, colorful and colorless, smooth and textural. The yellow circle within represents an eternal soul even though the cardboard materials reflects its own mortality.



A close-up of an 11 Faced Kannon



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Collection Connection for January 2013

*Eleven-headed Kannon* (#2012.32a,b)

Yuji Honbori (Japan, b.1958)

“One man’s trash is another man’s treasure.” No, this isn’t the tag line for a show on HGTV. It is Japanese sculptor Yuji Honbori’s explanation for his interest in turning discarded materials into beautiful works of art.

Trained at the Aichi Prefectural University of Fine Arts and Music in Kobe, Japan, Honbori began his career as a recycler using wood from demolished houses. His *Eleven-headed Kannon*, a recent MIA acquisition, is part of a series of life-size figures made out of used materials and based on historic Buddhist sculptures.

Kannon is a bodhisattva—a divine being who has delayed entering nirvana in order to help others achieve enlightenment. Kannon is the most widely worshipped of all the bodhisattvas in Japan, and the Kannon that served as the model for the MIA’s sculpture is definitely a treasure. Dating from the 8<sup>th</sup> century and enshrined at the Shorinji Temple in Nara, it has been declared a National Treasure by the Japanese government.

The whole work is well-proportioned, and the representation of the garments is easy and refined. The small faces attached to the head are very precisely executed, some showing expressions of compassion and some showing expressions of wrath. Some of the petals of the lotus pedestal have been repaired over the years. The halo behind the head, which has an embossed lotus-flower design, was damaged and remains only in fragments.

As for the trash part, Honbori’s Kannon is made out of cardboard. To be precise, it was made out of used fruit and vegetable crates that he rescued from his local grocery store. Honbori has said that far from attempting to disguise the humble beginnings of these materials he wants people to be able to see the food stains on the cardboard and identify the words describing the boxes’ original contents—words like onions, or cabbage, or oranges.

Honbori begins the process of transforming his used cardboard crates into art by drawing an outline of the sculpture he is recreating on paper. He then traces the outline onto cardboard and cuts the cardboard into the desired shape; one of his large-scale sculptures can be made up of thousands of individual cardboard pieces glued together. The result is both respectful of the Buddhist statues that he replicates and playful evidence that trash can indeed be turned into treasure.

After you’ve enjoyed Honbori’s contemporary *Eleven-headed Kannon* in Gallery 275 make sure to stop in Gallery 281 to take a look at another treasure, the MIA’s bronze *Standing Kannon* from 7<sup>th</sup> century Japan.

Mary Grau