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STATUE OF ASANGA

Wood. 1208. Hokuendō, Kōfuku-ji, Nara. National Treasure.

This imaginary portrait of the Buddhist philosopher Asaṅga (Japanese, Muchaku), co-founder of the Indian Mahāyāna Yogācāra, or Consciousness-Only, school, is by Unkei (?–1223), one of the great masters of Japanese Buddhist sculpture. It forms part of a group of three figures that also includes portrait sculptures of Maitreya (Japanese, Miroku) Bodhisattva, and Vasubandhu (Japanese, Seshin), the other great philosopher of the Yogācāra school.

The cloth-wrapped object Asaṅga holds in his hands is apparently a symbol of the Dharma that was transmitted to him by Maitreya in the Tushita Heaven. It may represent the “jewel casket” (*ratna-peṭa*) mentioned in a verse of the *Mahāyāna-sūtrā-lamkāra*, one of five treatises Maitreya gave to Asaṅga. The verse (1.2) reads: “The Dharma here revealed gives extreme pleasure, like beaten gold, like a lotus in bloom . . . like an open casket of jewels.”

Photograph courtesy of the Kyoto National Museum.