

Kanjizaoin is a rare, historically important example of twelfth-century Pure Land Buddhist architecture and garden design. The original temple featured a pair of elaborately decorated Amida Halls, a landscaped garden with a central, stream-fed pond, and extensive perimeter earthworks.

According to the *Azumakagami*, a thirteenth-century historical record, Kanjizaoin was constructed by the wife of Fujiwara no Motohira (1105–1157), the second lord of the Oshu Fujiwara clan that once ruled Hiraizumi. Researchers believe the original temple burned down in 1573, and by the seventeenth century most of its land had become paddy fields. Much of the current understanding of the temple and its history results from the archaeological excavations of the Kanjizaoin Temple ruins which began in 1954. Among other discoveries, researchers have located the sites of several temple buildings, including the Amida Halls.

According to the *Azumakagami*, the walls of the larger Amida Hall were decorated with scenes of life in Kyoto, including the Kamo Festival and Kiyomizudera Temple.

The Kanjizaoin Temple garden was designed to depict the Pure Land Western paradise, and to reproduce the peace and tranquility of this Buddhist paradise. The centerpiece of the garden is an 8,100-square-meter lake called Maizurugaike (Dancing Crane Pond), with its landscaped central island. The shape and design of the pond and its decorative rock formations are typical of twelfth-century Japanese garden design, and the garden at Kanjizaoin Temple is highly acclaimed as a rare example of twelfth-century Pure Land Buddhist garden architecture.

Kanjizaoin Temple and nearby Motsuji Temple were originally constructed around the same time, resulting in similarities in the designs of their gardens. However, researchers evaluate the garden at Kanjizaoin as being less elaborate than that of Motsuji. The pond at Kanjizaoin Temple has now been restored to its original state, based upon research and excavations at the site.

The Kanjizaoin Temple Remains were designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 2011.