

Gansenji Temple: Three-Storied Pagoda

In the center of the temple grounds of Gansenji, nestled in the hilly embrace of nature, is its towering Three-Storied Pagoda. According to temple legend, the pagoda was built by Emperor Ninmyo (810–850) between the years 834–847 as a memorial to a renowned priest. However, during restoration work in 1943, an inscription was discovered with the year 1442. Since most of Gansenji Temple's structures were destroyed in a fire in 1221, it is believed that the date on the pagoda inscription is likely to be accurate, and that the current pagoda dates to the Muromachi period (1336–1573).

While most temple pagodas can be viewed only from ground level, there is an upward path that wraps around the pagoda at Gansenji Temple. This gives visitors the unique opportunity to view the 18 m structure from all sides as well as from above. A close inspection reveals twelve small, carved figures at the corners of each level, which seem to be supporting the rafters on their shoulders. These figures, called *sumioni*, or corner demons, each wear a different expression, and have been designated as Important Cultural Properties.

The pagoda is opened for public viewing during special periods. On the walls of the first floor are colorful Buddhist depictions that serve as a backdrop for an altar. The wooden statue of Fugen Bosatsu on an Elephant used to be enshrined here before it was moved to the main hall. Fugen Bosatsu is a bodhisattva often associated with mercy and intelligence. Gansenji Temple's Fugen Bosatsu on an Elephant is thought to display a particular feminine grace, and has long been considered a divinity that aids women and leads them in the cycle of rebirth. Made in the Heian period (794–1185), it is designated as an Important Cultural Property.