Nio-mon: An Ancient Gate

This Edo-period (1603–1867) gate with its thatched roof is the oldest building in the entire Amidaji Temple complex. It was built in 1685 by Mohri Narinobu, the local daimyo, to replace the original thirteenth-century gate that had collapsed more than a century earlier. The present gate has the same design and dimensions as its predecessor. The gate gets its name from the *Nio*—literally two kings, the pair of muscular, fear-inspiring guardians who stand on either side of it. (Interestingly, the thatch on the roof has to be replaced every twenty-five years on the south side of the gate, but every ten to fifteen years on the north side, where it gets less sunlight and stays damp longer.)

Kongo Rikishi: Two Terrifying Guardians

Referred to either as *Nio* (two kings) or as *Kongo Rikishi* (mighty wrestlers), these figures are often found standing guard at temple gates. Traditionally, the statue on the right has his mouth open making an "a" sound, while the one on the left has his mouth closed to make an "um" sound. Like alpha and omega in Christianity, this combination connotes balance and completeness. Traces of vermilion paint show where the wood blocks that make up the statues are joined. The craftsmanship is extraordinary. The dynamic details—the popping veins, heaving rib cages, and swirling robes—are typical of Kaikei, the sculptor who created them. Weighing 340 kilograms, and 2.7 meters (right) and 2.75 meters (left) tall, the statues date from the early Kamakura period (1185–1333). Imposing though they are, they are modest in comparison to the similar guardians Kaikei made for Todaiji Temple in Nara, which are over eight meters in height.