

Maki Odo Temple: Sanctuary of Buddhist Treasures

At its peak many years ago, Makisan Denjoji Temple was one of the largest temples on the whole peninsula, a center for ascetic training. (If you would like to believe the legend, this is also where the ox with the wood from Fukiji Temple grew tired and refused to move any further with his load.) Today, however, it is most important for housing some of the finest examples of wooden Buddhist statuary in Japan—all Important Cultural Properties carved in the Heian period (794–1185). Even seen in this contemporary structure, their presence is powerful and intense, befitting their exalted positions in Esoteric Buddhism's pantheon. There is an aura of mystery however, for there is no clear record of where they came from or when—just another of the historical and spiritual enigmas that seem to haunt the mountains of the Kunisaki Peninsula.

Amida Nyorai

The centerpiece of the Treasure Hall is the seated image of Amida Nyorai, made of several large sections of Japanese cypress and guarded by four armored devas. The peaceful meditative pose and calm facial features of this 216-centimeter-tall statue are in sharp contrast to the poses of the four guardians, who seem caught in action. The bare skin of the Amida statue appears black where the gold leaf has worn down to show the dark lacquer base coat beneath. The shape of the face is not as round as most depictions of this deity, and the position of the hands is in their most welcoming alignment.

Fudo Myo-o

To the right of Amida is a rare standing image of Fudo Myo-o, a protective deity, with two attendants at its side. At over 250 centimeters, this is one of the largest wooden statues of this Buddhist figure in Japan. The exaggerated appearance is not meant to depict evil, but to frighten people into accepting salvation. Hints of the original indigo color of the robes are still visible in places on the worn surface. His right eye is clear and looking toward heaven, while his left is clouded and looking down at the earth. On his back is a spectacular rendition of a flaming sacred phoenix that swirls all around him, probably a later addition from the Edo period (1603–1867). The sword he wields in his right hand is said to cut through ignorance.

Daiitoku Myo-o

To the left of Amida sits a wooden image of Daiitoku Myo-o on a water buffalo. Like the figure on the other side, this is one of the Five Great Wisdom Kings of Esoteric Buddhism. His Sanskrit name is Yamantaka, or “one who terminates death” —so it’s easy to understand why he became popular as a god of warriors. At 241 centimeters in height, this is the largest wooden statue of this Buddhist deity in Japan. The very lifelike head and body of the water buffalo heightens the exaggerated physical nature of the king on its back, with his six faces, six arms, and six legs. (The animal is construed by some as support for the legend of the nutmeg tree of Fukiji Temple, but it also appears in earlier renditions of Yamantaka in China and India, so the connection is doubtful.)