

Mōtsūji Temple Overview

Mōtsū-ji Temple is one of Japan's most faithful remaining embodiments of culture at the end of the Heian period (794-1185). The temple grounds uniquely combine various cultural and religious features of the time with the surrounding natural landscape Enryū-ji, the Main Hall was burned down in 1226 and the rest of the halls had also burned down by the 16th century, however, the foundation stones and original pond are still intact, which is very rare.

Legend of Mōtsūji

According to legend, Mōtsūji was founded in 850 by the Buddhist priest Ennin (794–864, posthumously known as Jikaku Daishi). A high-ranking priest of the Tendai school, Ennin is said to have established many temples during his travels in the Tohoku region of northern Honshu.

Mōtsūji's construction

The second Fujiwara lord Motohira (1105–1157), who had consolidated his power in the region by 1128, restored Mōtsūji and began initial construction, which was later completed by his son Hidehira (1122?–1187). At its peak, the Mōtsūji complex contained 40 temple buildings and quarters for 500 priests that extended beyond the current temple grounds. A thirteenth century Japanese historical record known as the *Azuma Kagami* claimed that Mōtsū-ji's 'magnificence was unparalleled in all the land.' Mōtsū-ji was built in the Pure Land style popular among aristocrats in Kyoto during the late Heian period. A primary example of this style is the garden and large pond that were built to represent a Buddhist paradise in harmony with nature.

Mōtsūji today

Although all the temple buildings were destroyed by fires between the thirteenth and sixteenth centuries, foundation stones from various buildings, earthen mounds, and the Pure Land-style garden have survived in relatively good condition. Excavation and restoration allow visitors today to see and experience these unique artifacts from the Heian period.

Mōtsūji was designated a Special Historic Site in 1952, a Place of Scenic Beauty in 2005 and is one of five locations at Hiraizumi that were registered collectively as a UNESCO World Heritage site in 2011. A new main hall (*hondō*), designed by an expert in Heian architecture, was completed in 1989 for the 800th anniversary of the demise of

the Northern Fujiwara clan. The hall stands in a different location from the original, but still evokes a feeling of the Heian style.