

Kan'ei Temple: Ueno Daibutsu

The Ueno Daibutsu, the Great Buddha of Ueno, has survived a real cavalcade of misfortune during its 350-year history. Only the face of this once-imposing statue now stands on Daibutsuyama, a small hill in central Ueno Park, on which a Great Buddha figure was first installed in 1631. That original was financed by Hori Naoyori (1577–1639), lord of the Murakami domain (in present-day Niigata Prefecture). Hori had been presented land in Ueno for his services to the ruling Tokugawa shogunate and wanted to honor the memory of the countless thousands who had died during the Sengoku period (1467–1568), when local warlords vied for supremacy before the Tokugawa clan eventually emerged victorious. Hori's seated Great Buddha outlasted its originator but was destroyed in 1647, when an earthquake caused a fire that burned down the building housing the statue.

The Great Buddha of Ueno had become a well-loved landmark during its 16-year existence, and the people of Edo (present-day Tokyo) were eager to see it return. So eager, in fact, that a donation drive between 1655 and 1660 raised enough money to cast a new statue. The second Great Buddha, a bronze figure 3.6 meters tall, proved far more durable than its predecessor. While the statue did suffer repeated fire and earthquake damage in the 1800s, it was always restored, often by the descendants of Hori Naoyori. The turn of the century, however, meant a turn for the worse for the Great Buddha. The Great Kanto Earthquake of 1923, a 7.9-magnitude tremor that caused the death of more than 100,000 people, separated the statue's head from the rest of its body. Then, during World War II, all the metal of the statue except for the face was requisitioned for military use, and the mangled Great Buddha was left to gaze at a storeroom wall for decades. Finally in 1972, the face was returned to its home on Daibutsuyama after repeated requests by the local tourism association.