

Ueno Toshogu Shrine: Karamon Gate

Ueno Toshogu's ornamental Karamon Gate stands directly in front of the main shrine building (*shaden*). Both structures were built in 1651, when shogun Tokugawa Iemitsu (1604–1651) had the shrine reconstructed to more closely resemble Nikko Toshogu, the main Toshogu sanctuary in what is now Tochigi Prefecture, north of Tokyo. The Karamon is distinguished by its curved gable, an architectural feature popularized in the thirteenth century and often employed to symbolize authority. Underneath the gable, to the left and right of the entrance, are pillars covered with gold leaf, and beside these are two intricate carvings of dragons. These are attributed to the legendary and likely fictional Hidari Jingoro, an artist or group of artists whose work is said to decorate many famous buildings throughout Japan. The dragons are called *noboriryu* ("ascending dragon") and *kudariryu* ("descending dragon"). Note that the one facing downward is described as "ascending," illustrating the Tokugawa maxim that only those who remain humble can achieve true greatness.

On the inside, the two dragons are joined by an ornate bird, depicted in a detailed see-through carving installed between the golden door and the left pillar that helps prop up the roof extension. This red-headed creature is a *kankodori*, whose origins can be traced back to a Chinese legend. According to the story, the emperor at the time placed a great drum outside the gates of his palace, inviting the people to beat on it whenever they disagreed with his policies. The emperor, however, reigned with such wisdom that the drum was never used for its stated purpose. A bird built a nest in it instead, becoming a symbol of enlightened rule. This *kankodori* was added to the Karamon in the hope that the Tokugawa reign would be as peaceful as that of the mythical Chinese emperor. Another fable of Chinese origin provided the inspiration for the combination of lion guardians and peonies seen on the inside pillars. According to legend, the lion prefers to sleep under peonies, because the nectar of these flowers drives away the parasites that otherwise cling to the animal's skin, placing the king of the jungle in mortal danger.