

Ueno Toshogu Shrine: *Sukibei* Fence

The ornate "see-through" fence (*sukibei*) at Ueno Toshogu surrounds the shrine's main building (*shaden*), separating the sacred structure from the secular world. The plot it surrounds is also slightly higher than the ground around it, emphasizing the shrine's detachment from the outside. The fence was constructed in 1651, when Ueno Toshogu was rebuilt by shogun Tokugawa Iemitsu (1604–1651) in the decorative style meant to recall the splendor of Nikko Toshogu, the main sanctuary enshrining Tokugawa Ieyasu (1543–1616), founder of the Tokugawa shogunate. The fence, its see-through structure adopted so that guards on the outside could better protect persons of high rank engaged in prayer inside the shrine, was modeled on a similar barrier at Nikko Toshogu. The Ueno Toshogu fence, however, differs from the original in its decoration.

The red, green, and gold fence is adorned with more than 200 sculptures, featuring animals and plants of the land on the upper part and of the sea on the lower. Compared to the mythical creatures and auspicious flowers on the main shrine building and the Karamon Gate in front of it, the carvings on the fence are realistic and familiar, including fish, small birds, frogs, and butterflies. The lower part of the fence, with its catfish, carp, and turtles, is particularly noteworthy, as these subjects signify the proximity of the sea. In the 1600s, Ueno was within view of the ocean, which provided a livelihood for a large portion of the people in Edo (present-day Tokyo). This connection with the sea is absent in Nikko, which is located deep in the mountains north of Tokyo some 100 kilometers from the coast.

A designated Important Cultural Property, the *sukibei* fence has been restored several times during its 350-year history, most recently between 2009 and 2014. That undertaking involved painstaking restoration using seventeenth-century methods and materials, which had often been neglected in the past but now helped restore the barrier's original appearance.