

Encho Matsuri: History

The Encho Matsuri is an annual festival celebrated throughout the month of August at Zenshoan, a Zen Buddhist temple in Yanaka. The highlight of the festival is a display of ghost-themed paintings (*yurei-ga*) from the collection of Sanyutei Encho (1839–1900), a legendary performer of *rakugo* (traditional storytelling), whose stories were often set in Yanaka. While a ceremony to remember this cultural icon has been held every year at Zenshoan since Encho passed away and was buried in the temple's cemetery, the Encho Matsuri in its current form was initiated in 1985 to raise interest in the history of the neighborhood and to exhibit the remarkable trove of ghastly art assembled by Encho and donated to Zenshoan after his death. August is the ideal time for this festival, not only because it marks Encho's passing on August 11, but also because the display of ghost paintings is particularly fitting for the Buddhist Obon period, during which people honor the spirits of their ancestors by temporarily welcoming them back into the realm of the living. Besides the artwork, festival attendees can look forward to a number of *rakugo* performances on the temple premises.