

Temple Bell (*Bonsho*)

This 2.5-ton bronze bell, designated a National Treasure, once hung in the Bell Tower across the pond from the Phoenix Hall. The bell, cast during the Heian period (794–1185), was brought inside for conservation and restoration after centuries of exposure to the elements. A replica now hangs in the Bell Tower.

From ancient times, this bell has been considered one of the three finest temple bells in Japan, along with those at Onjoji Temple in Otsu and Todaiji Temple in Nara. The bell at Onjoji is thought to have the sweetest tone and the Todaiji bell the clearest resonance. The Byodoin bell is considered the most beautiful, for the intricate depictions and dense patterning of its surface. There is a band of dragons near the top, a band of celestial figures in the middle, and a band of mythical lions at the base. Most Japanese temple bells normally have larger areas of blank space.

The four panels of knobs near the top improve the bell's resonance. The two dragons that form the bell's hook are a common feature in Japan although in this bell the dragon that glares down at where the sounding beam once struck the instrument is unusually fierce.