

Itsukushima Shrine: Image of Tokiwa Gozen (*Ema* Images)

This Edo-period (1603–1868) painting depicts Tokiwa Gozen (1138–c.1180), the mother of the great samurai hero Minamoto no Yoshitsune (1159–1189), fleeing with her sons through the snow during a conflict between the rival Taira and Minamoto clans. It was presented to the shrine as an *ema* devotional offering.

The word *ema* (“horse picture”) commonly refers to the wooden votive tablets on which wishes and prayers are written and offered at Shinto shrines and Buddhist temples. Historically, however, *ema* were images or other depictions of horses, on which Shinto deities were thought to ride. In ancient Japan, living horses were presented to shrines, often associated with prayers related to rain. Only institutions such as the government, and well-off communities and individuals, had the means to donate actual horses, so ordinary people would present clay or wooden figurines instead. These statues gradually gained widespread popularity before giving way to drawings and paintings, and by the Muromachi period (1336–1573) *ema* motifs had come to include not only horses but also other animals as well as famous individuals, such as poets, aristocrats, and samurai. While wealthy devotees would present large, often elaborate works of art such as *ema*, others would make do with much smaller, simple images, which developed into the wooden tablets used today.

Itsukushima Shrine holds an extensive collection of *ema* presented to the shrine over the centuries. The oldest of these pictures is from 1520 and depicts *bugaku*, the ancient performing art introduced to Itsukushima from Kyoto in the twelfth century.