

Zao Gongen: Native Avatars of the Buddha

The three statues of Zao Gongen enshrined in the Zaodo (main hall) of Kinpusenji Temple are considered the most important figures of worship in Shugendo. They are Important Cultural Properties, kept behind closed doors for most of the year and only occasionally shown to the public. The statues are estimated to have been sculpted around 1590.

From left to right, the three statues are avatars representing the past, the present, and the future. Their striking, deep-blue skin color symbolizes the Buddhist concept of *daijihi*, or deep compassion and mercy.

The Zao Gongen are venerated here because they are said to have appeared to En no Gyoja (634–701), the founder of Shugendo, when he was praying to the Buddha to save humanity. En no Gyoja carved their likeness on a wild *yamazakura* cherry tree, which is considered the origin of Kinpusenji Temple.

The images of the three avatars, surrounded by flames and with wrathful expressions, evoke great energy. This striking appearance actually stems from a deep core of mercy and forbearance, symbolizing triumph over evil thoughts and actions. The surrounding flames are meant to burn away earthly desires and rid the world of evil.