

Sculpture of Kanzan and Jittoku

Doodling in Stone

On September 14, 1984, a 6.3-magnitude earthquake rocked Nagano Prefecture, collapsing part of the stone wall around Kotokuji Temple. Much to the surprise of the local people, this stone carving was found in the rubble. It was particularly surprising because the same wall had collapsed in an 1854 earthquake without exposing the stone.

The relief is assumed to be the work of a stonecutter who worked on the temple wall in the Bunsei era sometime between 1818 and 1831. It depicts Kanzan and Jittoku, two Taoist immortals who lived near the sacred Mount Tiantai during the Tang dynasty (618–907); they were a popular subject of Chinese and Japanese ink paintings. Kanzan, the poet-recluse, holds a scroll, while Jittoku, who did menial work in a monastery kitchen, holds a broom. Together, this incongruous pair represent the idea that enlightenment can come in unexpected ways. Over time, Kanzan and Jittoku came to be seen as incarnations of the bodhisattvas Monju and Fugen.