

Enku Sculptures at Tokakuji Temple, Higashiyama Shrine

The Late-Discovered Genius

Enku (ca. 1632–1695) was an itinerant Buddhist priest and sculptor who was born in Mino Province (modern-day Gifu Prefecture). As a young man, he made a vow to produce 120,000 religious statues, and he was certainly prolific throughout his career. Traveling throughout eastern and northern Japan, including Hokkaido, he carved statues from local timber in return for food and lodging, preaching as he went. His statues were unusual for the time, being carved from a single block of wood and unpainted, and often showing visible traces of the hatchet he used. In consequence, they were regarded as crude, clumsy, and unfinished. His genius was only recognized in the 1950s, a full two and a half centuries after his death. In the aftermath of World War II and with the coming of democracy, his naïve and unpolished work was perceived as expressing empathy with the plight of ordinary people. (Enku himself had been born into a poor family.) More than 5,300 works around Japan have now been identified as Enku's.

Tokakuji Temple has three sculptures by Enku. From left to right, these are Tenjin-zo, the god of scholarship (left); Idaten-zo, the god who takes care of monks' provisions (this was placed above the kitchen hearth, hence its smoke-blackened state) (center); and Benzaiten Jugo Doji-zo, representing Benzaiten, the goddess of music, poetry and art, who in this manifestation is normally represented with 15 little children, though seven are missing here (right).

Up the hill behind Tokakuji is Higashiyama Shrine. The path to the shrine is lined with weeping cherry trees and there are sweeping views across the valley.