

East Garden and West Garden

The East Garden, which has been likened to a hidden oasis, is located unobtrusively atop a gentle rise in the southeastern corner of the museum grounds. The garden contains stone sculptures of military and civilian officials as well as animal figures that adorned gravesites on the Korean Peninsula during the Joseon dynasty (1392–1910). These figures once graced the garden of a private home in Osaka and were donated to the museum in 1975 by Yamamoto Aya. The garden also contains a small stone stupa (pagoda) and Buddhist deities excavated from an area behind one of the stone walls of the Hokoji Temple. The former precincts of Hokoji overlap with the grounds of the museum, and the temple's southern gate used to stand in the area of the Heisei Chishinkan Wing.

The most prominent feature of the larger West Garden is a trove of historic stone monuments that stand amid a profusion of trees and flowers. Particularly striking are two granite stupas, each with thirteen tiers, which were moved from a nearby site and now stand in the northwest corner of the museum grounds. According to legend, they marked the graves of two retainers of the famous warrior Minamoto no Yoshitsune (1159–1189). The tale appears to be fiction as the date engraved on one of the stupas is equivalent to the year 1295.

Also in the West Garden are several stone sculptures of Buddhist divinities including a twelfth-century statue of Dainichi, the Cosmic Buddha, from Gyoganji temple; a triad of Amida, the Buddha of Infinite Light, along with two attendants that is also from the twelfth century; and one of Fudo Myo-o, foremost among the Wisdom Kings, that dates to the fifteenth century. Also in the garden are several rounded Christian tombstones with crosses carved on the front that date from the Keicho era (1596–1615), the beginning of the period of persecution of Christians in Japan.

Perhaps the most conspicuous object in the West Garden is composed of three stone bridge piers topped by a large stone girder. These come from the Great Gojo Bridge rebuilt by Toyotomi Hideyoshi (1537–1598) in 1588–1589. The bridge provided easy access to Hokoji, the temple with a massive Great Buddha Hall that Hideyoshi was constructing during the same period.