

The Temple of Sanjūsangendō, Overview and History

The temple of Sanjūsangendō stands as a monument to a remarkable chapter in Japanese history. For a period of just over a century, starting in about 1086, a series of emperors broke with tradition to seize direct control over the country's political and economic affairs. They managed this feat through officially stepping down from the throne while yet maintaining control. This so-called retirement was key to their success and freed them to amass enormous wealth and to engage in wide-ranging political intrigue.

Their departure from office was accompanied by a physical departure from the center of the imperial court. They built sprawling temple-palace complexes just outside Kyoto's formal boundaries that served as both their residences and administrative headquarters. Many temples hosted rituals that sanctified the former sovereign's rule and perpetually confirmed his new, transcendent status as Dharma Sovereign (*hōo*).

The location, architectural styles, and artistic motifs of Sanjūsangendō reflect the intersection of politics, economy, and religious devotion at a time of heated competition between the court, the aristocracy, and an increasingly assertive warrior class. The great hall of Sanjūsangendō and almost all of its sculptures are designated National Treasures.

Emperor Goshirakawa

Sanjūsangendō was part of the sprawling temple-palace complex called Hōjūjidono that was built by order of retired emperor Goshirakawa (1127–1192) in 1164. Substantial

funding for the project was provided by warlord Taira no Kiyomori (1118–1181), who had become a powerful figure in the court.

The temple's name itself sheds light on the ideals that informed its creation. The formal name is Rengeōin, meaning the "Temple of the Lotus King." Drawing on ideas of Buddhist kingship expressed in the Lotus Sutra, the name suggested that Goshirakawa had transcended conventional political discourse, portraying him as a dharma sovereign or perhaps even *chakravartin*, an ancient Indian concept meaning "universal monarch."

The Name "Sanjūsangendō" and the Principle Icon of Worship

The temple's popular name of "Sanjūsangendō" comes from the building's physical composition, and simply means "hall with 33 intervals," referring to the intervals between columns, and suggesting an extremely long structure. The Buddhist resonances in the name are unmistakable. The number 33 derives from a belief that the all-seeing, all-compassionate bodhisattva Kannon (Avalokiteshvara in Sanskrit), can assume 33 different forms to assist sentient beings and guide them to salvation. It is no coincidence that the Thousand-armed Kannon (Senju Kannon) is the principal image of worship at Sanjūsangendō and that the hall is filled with one thousand statues of that same enlightened being. The sheer number and repetition of the images reflect the ideology as well as the popularity of this particular bodhisattva in the twelfth century, a period when many believed salvation could only be achieved through divine intervention rather than individual devotion alone.

Fire, Reconstruction, and Later Developments

Goshirakawa's Heian-period temple-palace complex of Hōjūjidono was completely destroyed by fire in 1249, including Sanjūsangendō. Many of the original Kannon sculptures were lost in the fire, but some were carried away in time and are still kept in the temple today. The hall of Sanjūsangendō was rebuilt and new carvings of the lost sculptures were completed. Although it has undergone several major restorations over the course of 750 years, the building that remains today dates from 1266.

In the late sixteenth century, the warlord Toyotomi Hideyoshi (1537–1598) incorporated Sanjūsangendō into a large complex of temples he was creating in the Higashiyama area. The focal point of this complex was a new and massive Great Buddha Hall at Hōkōji Temple, located due north of Sanjūsangendō. The Great South Gate (Nandaimon) of Sanjūsangendō and the earthen wall along the property's southern edge date to this period, and have a directional correspondence with the Great Buddha Hall at Hōkōji. Both lie along the same north-south axis that also intersects the main entrance to the Kyoto National Museum.

Sanjūsangendō is widely celebrated for its unique style, grand design, and its breathtaking iconography. It also stands as a physical monument to a brief period in Japanese history when emperors leveraged the ideas of Buddhist kingship and the power of monumental architecture to assert a truly transcendent status.