

## Plum Blossoms and Poetry

This diorama depicts a plum blossom party held at the official residence of Dazaifu Governor-General Otomo Tabito (dressed in purple) in 730. Government officials gathered under the plum trees—introduced from China and considered a rarity at the time—to eat, drink, and compose improvised verse together.

This party has deep significance for Japanese culture. Thirty-two poems composed at this gathering can be found in the *Man'yōshū* (the oldest extant anthology of Japanese poetry, dating to the eighth century). The Reiwa era (2019–) was so named after modern-day Japanese government officials and historians were inspired by the kanji characters contained within the preface to these poems in the *Man'yōshū*.

The seventh to twelfth centuries were a golden period in Dazaifu's history. During this time, Dazaifu government officials had a keen understanding and appreciation of foreign cultures due to the city's proximity to the Asian mainland and frequent interaction with other kingdoms. They were skilled in diplomacy and the military arts but were also expected to be accomplished poets. The plum blossom partygoers would have used their skills to improvise poems on such subjects as the blossoms, the weather, and the prevailing atmosphere of the gathering. An official scribe recorded the verses as they were recited.

The Hakata Ningyo dolls in this tableau are very fine examples of pottery unique to Fukuoka. If you look closely, you can see plum blossoms in the sake cups and in the attendees' hair. Note that the officials are wearing different colored garments indicative of their status.

Plum trees have a special significance in Dazaifu. The grounds of Dazaifu Tenmangu Shrine are full of plum trees, including the fabled “flying” plum tree, *tobiume*. Legend tells the story of the plum tree of a Kyoto garden that uprooted itself and flew from Kyoto to Dazaifu to be close to Sugawara Michizane after the statesman and scholar was exiled from the city.

### *Who was Sugawara Michizane?*

Sugawara Michizane (845–903) was a scholar and politician. After his death, his spirit was deified and enshrined at Dazaifu Tenmangu as Tenjin. He is known as a guardian of learning, culture, and the arts. Michizane had a particular liking for plum trees.