

## **Myozenji Museum**

Myozenji Temple is one of the most significant religious sites in Shirakawa-go and has been the main Buddhist sanctuary in the village of Ogimachi since its founding in 1748. A temple of the Jodo Shinshu (True Pure Land) school, the dominant form of Buddhism in this area, Myozenji has a distinctive thatched main hall that dates to 1827. Next to the main hall is the kuri, or living quarters of the head priest and his family, occupying one of the largest gassho-style houses in the village. This structure was built in 1817 and is now a museum where visitors can learn about traditional life in Shirakawa-go.

The museum building is one of the few houses of its kind in the area with plastered earthen walls, which are more fire-resistant than wooden walls. Its 330-square-meter first floor houses the living quarters, including a large living room with an irori fireplace at the center. Above the fireplace hangs a hiama, a wooden board used to extinguish sparks rising from the fire, to dissipate smoke, and to prevent heat from dispersing throughout the house. The living room was where the family ate and spent time together sitting around the hearth in strictly prescribed seating order. The head of the household sat with his back against the thick post at the center of the building, symbolizing his role as the main breadwinner. His wife sat on the right-hand side and his firstborn son on the left, while the rest of the family had their places on the opposite side of the irori.

Upstairs in the four-level attic, which was used mainly for cultivating silkworms, visitors can view a variety of tools, kitchen utensils, ornaments, and other items that convey how the people of Shirakawa-go traditionally made a living. The attic also provides a look at the inside of the roof structure, which is secured by straw ropes and bindings (neso) made of witch hazel saplings. The foundation and first floor of a gassho-style house such as the Myozenji kuri were usually built by professional carpenters, whereas ordinary villagers would work together to assemble everything above the house's lattice ceiling.

After viewing the attic, visitors can follow a covered corridor from the kuri into the main hall, the interior of which is in the ornate style characteristic of Jodo Shinshu temples. The landscape paintings on the walls, many of which depict Mt. Fuji, are the work of artist Hamada Taisuke (1932–).