

Fukuoji Shrine Autumn Festival

Just west of Ninnaji is Fukuoji Shrine, dedicated to Empress Dowager Hanshi (833–900), the mother of Emperor Uda (867–931), the founder of Ninnaji. The bond between this mother and son is celebrated every year on the third Sunday of October during the Fukuoji Shrine Autumn Festival. An elaborate *mikoshi* (portable Shinto shrine) believed to contain the spirit of Hanshi is carried from the shrine through the surrounding neighborhood to Ninnaji. The procession enters the temple grounds through the Gate of the Guardian Kings, then passes through the Chokushimon, a gate usually opened only for the emperor's retinue or his messengers, and stops in front of the Shinden Hall. A sacred tree branch (*tamagushi*) believed to be imbued with the spirit of Hanshi is placed in front of a portrait of Emperor Uda enshrined in the innermost chamber of the Shinden. This moment is considered the symbolic reunion of mother and son. The *mikoshi* is then carried back to Fukuoji Shrine. The rituals of the Autumn Festival serve as a reminder of how Shinto and Buddhist beliefs and practices were closely intertwined throughout much of Japanese history.