

Shachi

Look at the rooftop of most any Japanese castle and you will spot a pair of *shachi*—mythical creatures with the heads of tigers and the bodies of fish. Because of their association with water, *shachi* were installed as charms to protect against fire. Other water imagery, such as waves and fish, were common as well. *Shachi* are positioned at each end of the roof's central ridge, and the creatures' upturned tails form part of the characteristic silhouette of castle keeps.

Seven generations of ceramic *shachi* have guarded Himeji Castle. Like the castle's roof tiles, *shachi* eventually deteriorate from exposure to the elements. On display here are *shachi* from the fifth and sixth generations, as well as a replica of the current version. Each generation is named after the imperial era when it was installed.

Meiji Shachi

This *shachi* was created in 1910 during a series of major repairs on the castle at the end of the Meiji era (1868–1912). One of the pair of fifth-generation *shachi*, it graced the eastern end of the keep roof until it and its western twin were replaced during castle restorations in the 1950s and 1960s.

According to the inscription on the base, the *shachi* was made in Tatsuno-machi, a neighborhood just west of the castle, by Okose Ichizaemon (dates unknown). Okose was the fifth head of a family of roof-tile artisans who lived in Tatsuno-machi.

Showa Shachi

This *shachi* is one of the sixth-generation pair installed during the castle's Showa-era restoration from 1956 to 1964. Its design is based on a smaller *shachi* found on the keep's second story. Dated to 1687, the smaller figure is believed to be the oldest surviving *shachi* at the castle.

A total of 11 *shachi* on the keep buildings were replaced during the Showa-era restoration, including the two large figures at the apex of the main building. How many can you spot?

Heisei Shachi

A new pair of *shachi* was created for the castle in November 2011 and installed the following February as part of large-scale renovations to the castle during the 2010s. The manufacturer made extra *shachi* in case any should suffer damage, and the figure displayed here is one of those. Identical to the *shachi* on the roof, it is 1.9 meters long and weighs 300 kilograms.

The seventh-generation *shachi* are modeled after their Showa-era predecessors. Thanks to improvements in ceramic manufacturing, however, the new figures have fewer holes in their bodies than the Showa *shachi*. Holes are required to let heat escape during the firing process and prevent cracking.