

Nachisan Shrine Mandala

The Nachisan Shrine Mandala in Kumano Nachi Taisha Grand Shrine's Treasure Hall was painted roughly five centuries ago, and depicts the shrine and its surroundings. More than thirty copies of the mandala are known to survive, but the one in the Treasure Hall is particularly well-preserved and has been designated a Cultural Property of Wakayama Prefecture.

Doctrine and Cosmology

The concept of the mandala arrived in Japan with esoteric Buddhism. The word "mandala" was originally used to describe relatively abstract graphic representations of Buddhist doctrine and cosmology. However, over the centuries, it also came to be applied to concrete images of major shrines and temples used to extend the reach of these religious institutions and maintain their influence over time. These images developed into pilgrimage mandalas showing pilgrims traveling through the depicted sites. They served as visual "travel guides" as well as an exposition of doctrine. Some devotees even used them to take "virtual pilgrimages."

The Nachisan Shrine Mandala is one of the earliest examples of the pilgrimage mandala genre. Kumano *bikuni* (nuns) carried copies of the mandala across Japan, unrolling them in public spaces to use as visual aids when preaching the Kumano faith. The mandala showed people what they could expect when they made the pilgrimage.

Sacred Structures

At the top and center of the painting are five sanctuary buildings (*honden*) in a row (although the fifth is slightly set back), with a longer sixth sanctuary called the Hasshaden ("sanctuary of eight shrines") to the left. The current sanctuary buildings are arranged in essentially the same L-shaped layout. Note the crows in front of the buildings. These hint at the Yatagarasu (three-legged crow), which figures heavily in Kumano legend.

Structurally, the mandala can be analyzed in many ways. Amida-ji Temple and the moon at the upper left clearly contrast with Nachi Waterfall and the sun at the upper right. These form a horizontal opposition of yin and yang, or death and life. Others see a

“yin axis” associated with the afterlife stretching diagonally from top left to bottom right, where a monk is seen preparing to depart Fudarakusan-ji Temple by boat. He is setting out on the “crossing to Fudaraku,” a self-martyrdom ritual.

Lead Characters

The same pair of white-clad pilgrims are depicted at many places in the mandala, showing their progress through the sacred site. This technique of portraying multiple moments on the same landscape was common in traditional Japanese art, and was often used in picture-scrolls illustrating travel.

Significantly, one pilgrim is male and the other female, signaling that the Kumano faith did not discriminate on the basis of gender. The openness of the faith is also shown by the diversity of the visitors: nobles and commoners, mountain ascetics and traveling merchants, *dengaku* dancers, and a monk carrying a *biwa* (lute) on his back. All were, and are, welcome at Kumano.

Many of the human figures depicted in the Nachisan Shrine Mandala are specific individuals, both historical and fictional. These include the following:

1: **Mongaku** was a Buddhist ascetic and former samurai who sat under Nachi Waterfall for 21 days in winter reciting the mantra of the deity Fudo Myo-o. This was his way of atoning for a murder he had committed that led him to renounce worldly things and become a traveling monk. Mongaku also plays a pivotal role in the epic *Tale of the Heike*, urging Minamoto no Yoritomo (1147–1199), the first of the Kamakura shoguns, to rebel against the powerful Taira clan. The austerities he performed under a waterfall at Kumano were a popular subject in traditional art.

2 and 3: **Kongara** and **Seitaka** were attendants of Fudo Myo-o who prevented Mongaku from freezing to death so that he could complete his austerities.

4: **Izumi Shikibu** (974–1034) was one of Japan’s greatest classical poets. She made the pilgrimage to Kumano in the early eleventh century. It is said that she began menstruating just before she reached the end of her pilgrimage, and wrote a mournful poem in the belief that menstruation would make her ritually impure and unable to worship at the shrine. That night, a visitation from the deities of Kumano reassured her

this was not the case. The story was often told to emphasize the radical openness of Kumano as a place of pilgrimage.

5: Retired Emperor Go-Shirakawa (1127–1192) made 32 pilgrimages to Kumano between 1160 and 1191. This helped cement the popularity of the pilgrimage among aristocrats and warriors. Some scholars have argued the depicted figure may be either of the retired emperors Kazan (968–1008) or Go-Toba (1180–1239) instead, or even a nonspecific “retired emperor” figure.