

Zuiganji Temple

Zuiganji Temple was rebuilt in 1609 by Date Masamune (1567–1636), the founder of the city of Sendai and the first ruler of the powerful Sendai domain (which encompassed today's Miyagi Prefecture).

The site was the location of a temple belonging to the Tendai sect of Esoteric Buddhism built in 828; the temple was converted into a Zen temple during the Kamakura period (1185–1333), but later fell into a long period of decline. In the seventeenth century, Masamune decided to have it rebuilt to serve as the Date family's temple, as well as a posthumous memorial to ensure his ascension to the Buddhist paradise.

The approach to the temple is lined with slabs of local slate, which have a mirror-like sheen when wet. The path also goes past meditation caves in the rock faces surrounding the temple; the oldest caves date to the Kamakura period.

Zuiganji Temple has three entrance gates. The Onarimon Gate is used only by emperors, and was last opened for Emperor Meiji (1852–1912). The Chumon Gate was reserved for lords and ritual processions, although visitors are now allowed to walk through it into the temple courtyard, where they can admire two 400-year-old plum trees brought back from Choson (modern-day Korea) by Masamune. The Toryumon Gate was once used by commoners.

Visitors pass through the *kuri*, a massive kitchen building with a distinctive large wooden roofed chimney, to enter the *hondo* main hall.

The exterior of the temple's main hall and kitchen building are striking for their white walls, and dark wood beams beneath sloping slate roofs. These features give the temple a clean, minimalist appearance inspired by the style of Zen temples, albeit on a massive scale. Masamune is said to have laid out the boundaries of the temple's foundations himself.

In contrast to the simple exterior, the interior of Zuiganji Temple's main hall is decorated with colorful screen paintings, elaborate coffered ceilings, and detailed wood carvings, which display the Date family's taste, power, and wealth. This contrast between the interior and exterior is a trademark of the Date style. Another hallmark is the display of

wealth through easily overlooked details, such as the choice to cover the expansive roofs in tile, a massive expense in a region so often hit by storms and typhoons.

Despite being a temple, Zuiganji's interior layout more closely resembles that of a castle. The artwork of the rooms thus becomes progressively more elaborate the closer they are to the inner sanctum. The Matsu no Ma ("Pine Room"), where tea servers waited to bring refreshments to lords and visitors, is decorated with relatively simple paintings of roosters and doves; but in the Bun'o no Ma, reserved for Masamune and his closest advisors, an exquisitely detailed painting of a legendary Chinese utopia covers the walls. On a raised dais to the rear of this room is the Jojodan no Ma ("Highest Room"), which was reserved for the use of the emperor.

The detailed wood carvings of Zuiganji Temple were created by craftspeople brought all the way from Kyoto. Under the eaves, there are delicate depictions of grapes, while inside the Onari entrance hall, there is an intriguing carving of a rather skinny rhinoceros.

For centuries, Zuiganji has played a central role in Matsushima's economy and culture, and at its peak in the Edo period (1603–1867), thousands of monks and workers attended to the needs of flocks of pilgrims visiting the temple.

The temple grounds have shrunk since the Edo period, but Zuiganji is still at the heart of the community. During the 2011 Great East Japan Earthquake and subsequent tsunami, residents fled to the temple for safety. While the waters destroyed the approach to the temple and killed the huge centuries-old cryptomeria trees that once lined the way, the temple's main buildings were spared, and Zuiganji provided refuge for the residents of Matsushima.

The *hondo* main hall, Onari entrance hall, and *kuri* kitchen are all designated National Treasures. The Onarimon Gate, the plaster *taikobei* walls on either side of that gate, and the Chumon Gate are designated Important Cultural Properties.