

Sanmon Gate

This massive gate was built in 1622 by the chief carpenter to the shogun. It is the only original building on the Zojoji Temple grounds. The full name of the gate, Sangedatsumon, means liberation from the three worldly afflictions of greed, anger, and ignorance, and those passing through it are purged when they enter the temple.

The second floor of the 21-meter tall gate, which is closed to the public, enshrines a statue of Shakyamuni, the historical Buddha, flanked by two bodhisattvas and 16 arhats, the most dedicated of the Buddha's disciples, each carved with a distinct facial expression. The statues are thought to date from the early Edo period (1603–1867).

The elaborate style of the gate's construction, with its pent roof on the lower section and a hip-and-gable roof above, was adopted from Chinese architecture of the sixth century, around the time when Buddhism was introduced to Japan. The simpler design of the second-floor balustrade reflects a more Japanese architectural aesthetic. The bright vermillion lacquered exterior was one of the most famous landmarks of Edo (now Tokyo).

The Sangedatsu gate does not have the two fierce Nio guardian statues that are usually found at the entrance of many Buddhist temples. This is because Zojoji is a Jodo (Pure Land) sect temple. In Pure Land Buddhism all comers on the road to salvation are welcomed.

A ten-year restoration project of the gate is scheduled to begin in April 2025.