

Five Hundred Arhat Scrolls

A selection from a remarkable collection of 100 scrolls by the late Edo period painter Kano Kazunobu (1816–1863) is displayed on a rotating schedule at the temple's Treasures Gallery. Kazunobu was a devoted Buddhist renowned for his religious paintings. In 1854 he was commissioned by a priest from Genkoin Temple, one of Zojoji's subsidiary temples, to create paintings of the daily lives of 500 arhats, the most accomplished and dedicated of the historical Buddha's disciples.

The complete series, *Five Hundred Arhats*, depicts worldly desires and ways to overcome them. Some scrolls are intimate scenes of the arhat's private lives, showing them bathing, studying, or shaving. Others show them with strange "sacred beasts," or floating over horrific scenes depicting the hellish fates awaiting those who lack piety—floods, earthquakes, molten pools, and freezing ponds. Kazunobu was a member of the Kano school of painting. This school merged the ink and brushwork of Chinese painting with the more colorful, decorative patterns of Japanese art. Its use of light and shade hints of chiaroscuro. His unconventional eccentricity and dynamism is similar to that of other Edo-period masters, such as the woodblock artists Hokusai (1760–1849) and Kuniyoshi (1798–1861).

Kazunobu spent ten years working almost exclusively on the scrolls. He died after finishing the 96th scroll, when he was 48 years old. The final four were completed by one of his students under the direction of his wife, and the collection was dedicated to Zojoji in 1863. A hall to exhibit the scrolls was built just inside the Sanmon Gate in 1878, but it was destroyed in the 1945 air raids. Fortunately, the scrolls survived, possibly because they were stored in the sutra repository, which was not damaged in the war.

Ten scrolls, each measuring 172 centimeters by 85 centimeters, from the set are displayed in the Treasures Gallery and changed every three to four months.