

Ukimido Hall

Ukimido Hall is part of the Mangetsuji Zen temple and is one of the most scenic spots on Lake Biwa. The “floating pavilion” sits at the end of a wooden bridge (today reinforced with concrete stilts) leading out onto the lake, giving the structure the appearance of floating on the water. The Buddhist priest Genshin (942–1017) built the Ukimido to pray for safe travel on the lake. He chose the Katata area, a place where the lake narrows, because it was a popular port for merchants and traders transporting goods across the water. The Ukimido was severely damaged by a typhoon in 1934 but was rebuilt in 1937 and carefully renovated in 1982.

The wooden pavilion is plain and unadorned, famous rather for its solitary position and quiet surroundings than for its architecture. A gnarled old pine tree hangs low over the bridge, its branches held up by wooden supports. On the side of the hall facing Lake Biwa is a small stage originally used for sacred dance and music rituals performed facing the 1,000 small golden statues of Amida Buddha inside.

The Ukimido has been a popular subject for artists over the centuries. The sight of wild geese descending over the pavilion at sunset is one of the Eight Views of Omi, a traditional selection of scenic views of Omi Province (present-day Shiga Prefecture), famously painted by Utagawa Hiroshige (1797–1858). The poet Matsuo Basho (1644–1694) visited the temple many times and wrote a haiku about seeing the moon over the hall. The poem is carved into a rock on the temple grounds.

Mangetsuji is thought to have been founded in the late Heian period (794–1185) and is dedicated to Kannon, the bodhisattva of compassion. The temple’s Kannondo Hall houses a statue of Kannon from the Heian period that is designated an Important Cultural Property. The hall’s ceiling has gold leaf alongside brightly colored images of flowers depicted as offerings to the bodhisattva.