

Otsu Festival

The Otsu Festival is the largest festival in the city and takes place annually in mid-October. The two-day celebration includes 13 giant floats that are paraded through the city center near Tenson Shrine. The floats are the wheeled *hikiyama*, the same style as the towering vehicles featured in Kyoto's Gion Festival. It is said that the celebration, which was started in the seventeenth century by local merchants, was inspired by Kyoto's famous festival.

Unlike the Gion Festival, however, the Otsu Festival began to feature moving mechanical dolls on the floats for the first time in Japan. Each float has its own distinctive dolls that illustrate a different legend or folk tale. While some move by themselves, others are like giant wooden puppets, moved by the musicians and revelers on the floats, who also throw good-luck charms into the crowd. Over time, other festivals around the country have added similar automatons to their own celebrations.

A distinct tapestry is displayed on the rear of each float, and some tapestries have impressively long histories. Two floats feature pieces from *The Fall of Troy*, a sixteenth-century Belgian tapestry sent to a daimyo lord as a gift from the Pope. The floats used today are thought to date back to the Edo period (1603–1867).

The Otsu Festival Float Exhibition Center in downtown Otsu displays reproductions of festival floats. There is a rotating exhibition of the different wood and metal ornaments used to decorate the floats on the second floor. Every two months, a different float is showcased and its intricate ornaments are put on display.