

,200 Stone Arhat Statues

One of the most distinguishing features of Otagi Nenbutsuji is the assortment of 1,200 expressive stone statues on the temple grounds. The statues are representations of arhats (*rakan* in Japanese), enlightened people who understand the truth of Buddhist laws and teachings. In Buddhist art and stories they are often depicted in groups of specific numbers, like the 500 arhats said to have been present at the death of Siddhartha Gautama, the historical Buddha (ca. fifth to fourth century BCE), when he entered complete nirvana.

In 1981, along with large-scale renovations, Otagi Nenbutsuji began a project to create 500 statues of arhats over a period of five years in order to attract support from followers. Participants traveled from all over Japan to learn the basics of stone carving under the guidance of chief abbot Nishimura Kocho and make statues on the temple grounds. The initial goal of creating 500 statues was achieved within a single year instead of five, but applications continued to pour in from near and far. To accommodate these requests, the temple decided to place 700 more arhat statues, resulting in a total of 1,200 over ten years. The figures in the second set are slightly smaller to make the most of the available space on the grounds.

Each participant had their own motivation for carving a statue, be it a memorial for a loved one, an expression of devotion, or a testament to their own life. With Kocho's encouragement, the contributors poured their hearts and souls into their arhat statues, resulting in a vast array of designs and expressions. Some of the figures are posed deep in prayer, others display joyful grins, and many hold items that carried special meaning to the carver or to the person who inspired the statue, such as favorite animals, sports gear, or even modern devices like cameras and cassette players.

In just a few decades, the arhat statues of Otagi Nenbutsuji have become covered in moss and now look like they have been a part of the mountain landscape for centuries. The statues attract many visitors to the temple, especially in the spring and fall when the leaves of the surrounding maple trees are particularly vibrant.