

Kokindenju no Ma

This ancient building has a rich and complex history that is intertwined with Japanese literature and imperial family traditions. *Kokindenju* is the tradition of orally passing on the esoteric interpretations of the poems in the *Kokinshu*, a collection compiled at the command of Emperor Daigo (r. 897–930).

The first of an eventual 21 collections, the *Kokinshu* contained 1,111 poems, more than 450 of which were anonymously written; the others were composed by over 120 named poets. Hosokawa Fujitaka (1534–1610), the grandfather of the first-generation Hosokawa lord of Kumamoto, was assigned to teach the *Kokinshu*'s secrets to Prince Hachijo Toshihito (1579–1629), the younger brother of Emperor Go-Yozei (1571–1617). Since this was a position traditionally filled by courtiers, it was a great honor for Fujitaka, a samurai, to be chosen for the role. Fujitaka taught the prince in this building, which originally stood on the grounds of the palace in Kyoto.

The hip-and-gable roofed structure is more than 400 years old. It was moved to Suizenji Jojuen Garden in 1912 to replace a teahouse that was destroyed in the 1877 Satsuma Rebellion. The building was opened to the public in 1955 and most recently restored in 2010. There are many interesting interior details. The blue floral paintings on the *fusuma* sliding doors at the back of the front room, for example, are *go-shichi no kiri*, “five-seven paulownia.” The paulownia was once the crest of the Japanese imperial family; the “five-seven” part of the name deriving from the fact that the stalks on either side have five blossoms, while the one in the center has seven.

Room with a View

The most striking feature of the two sliding doors of *yakusugi* cedar on the left are a few faint patches of black pigment on the powerful wood-grain pattern. This is all that remains of an ink painting by Kano Eitoku (1543-1590) of the Kano school, an influential school of Japanese painting that was supported by the Tokugawa shogunate (1603-1867). Five of the pillars and the ceiling are original and their rough, splintered surfaces show their age. On the left is an elegant pointed-arch-shaped *katomado* window that frames the view across the pond like a mountain landscape in miniature. In the right-hand front corner is a tree stump known as the *kokindenju no matsu*, literally

the “oral-transmission-of-*Kokin*-poetry pine.” This is associated with Hosokawa Fujitaka, who served as tutor to Emperor Go-Yozei’s younger brother.

Poetic Justice

In 1600, Fujitaka was among the men who came under siege at Tanabe Castle in Tango near Kyoto. Unsure whether he would make it out alive, Fujitaka, as guardian of the *Kokinshu* oral tradition, named a pine in the castle garden the *kokindenju no matsu*. Emperor Go-Yozei was worried that Fujitaka’s death would bring the oral tradition to an end and ordered the besieging side to let him go. The pine tree that Fujitaka communed with in this time of high anxiety later withered and died, leaving only the stump and roots, which were discreetly placed in the Kokindenju no Ma as a reminder of the vicissitudes of life.

The paintings on the sliding doors in the room at the rear of the building are a reproduction of *Seven Sages in a Bamboo Grove*, the famous *fusuma* paintings by Kaiho Yusho (1533–1613).