

Overview of the Carvings

The construction of the Shodendo main hall, including the crafting of its carvings, took around 25 years and was funded by the local community. The lavish, vividly colored carvings that adorn the main hall depict popular Buddhist allegories and motifs and include aspects of classical Chinese culture as well as auspicious symbols. The imagery is bright and joyous, and the level of detail is a testament to the skill of the master carvers.

The carvings are often compared with those decorating Nikko Toshogu Shrine in Tochigi Prefecture, a mausoleum that was completed over 100 years earlier. Some of the craftsmen who worked on the Shodendo also worked on the restoration of Nikko Toshogu Shrine.

Allegories and popular stories

Large panels on the back and sides of the main hall depict the Seven Gods of Fortune (*shichifukujin*). Below these panels, scenes of children at play add a humorous touch. These scenes are watched over by 12 monkeys, each with a distinct expression. High up under the eaves, carvings depict classical Chinese stories.

Natural beauty and mythical beasts

The depictions of plants and animals on the Shodendo are remarkably lifelike, showing keen observation of the natural world. There are more whimsical impressions of mythical beasts that reflect popular folk beliefs in the eighteenth century. The detail is so elaborate that repeat visitors discover something new each time.

Under the eaves, the rafter tails and corner corbels feature dynamic heads of real and mythical beasts that are thought to ward off evil spirits. These include dragons, Chinese phoenixes, lions, elephants, and black, elephant-like creatures called *baku*, which are said to devour nightmares.

A legacy of decorative art

The carvings are the work of Ishihara Ginpachiro (dates unknown), and his apprentices. The Shodendo is three halls connected under a single roof: a hall of worship (*haiden*) at the front, an inner sanctuary (*okuden*) at the back, and an intermediate hall (*chuden*) in between. The inner sanctuary was constructed first and features the most elaborate carvings. The decoration becomes sparser toward the front hall, which may indicate that funds began to run out towards the end of the project.