

Main Shrines (Hongū)

The four main shrines, or *hongū*, at the heart of Sumiyoshi Taisha are home to the shrine's patron deities: the three sea gods called the Sumiyoshi Sanjin and empress-regent Jingū, who is said to have founded the shrine in the third century. The main shrines were originally dismantled and rebuilt every 20 years, but this practice was disrupted by civil war in the sixteenth century and abandoned entirely in the early nineteenth. The current structures date from 1810.

The three *hongū* shrines dedicated to the Sumiyoshi Sanjin stand in a straight line along an east-west axis. This sets them apart from most Japanese shrines, which face south or east, following rules of geomancy adopted from China. According to one theory, the unique layout of the main shrines emulates the three stars of Orion's belt, which were commonly used by navigators. The bright central stars of the Orion constellation cross the sky each night, rising in the east and setting in the west.

The shrine dedicated to empress-regent Jingū sits next to the westernmost Sumiyoshi Sanjin shrine. Its design mirrors that of the others except for one detail: the ends of the crossed timbers at either end of its roof ridge are cut horizontally rather than vertically—an acknowledgement, perhaps, of its occupant's gender.

Each *hongū* consists of a main sanctuary called a *honden*, an attached offering hall called a *heiden*, and a corridor that connects the two called a *watariden*. The *honden*, in which the deity is enshrined, has two rooms. Its outer doors are opened for major rites and festivals, but the doors to the innermost sanctuary are kept closed; except for one special ceremony every 20 years.

The *honden* are built in the *sumiyoshi-zukuri* style, which pre-dates influences from the Asian mainland. The design is thought to be similar to the temporary shrines erected for the enthronement ceremonies of Japanese emperors during the Asuka period (592–710). The buildings are surrounded by wooden fences that delineate the sacred precinct and are meant to ward off evil spirits. The simple gable roofs are covered with thin shingles made of cypress. The bright vermillion of the beams comes from mercury pigments, and the whitewash on the walls is made from crushed seashells. All four *honden* are designated National Treasures.

The *heiden* were added in the Kamakura period (1185–1333) as religious rites changed and developed; originally priests would conduct ceremonies on the hard earth in front of the *honden*. Each *watariden* contains a small torii gate. Daiichi Hongū, the easternmost shrine, has a larger *heiden* than the other three, but the layouts are otherwise identical. Both the *heiden* and *watariden* of the main shrines at Sumiyoshi Taisha are designated Important Cultural Properties.

The dense crowds that gather in front of Daiichi Hongū during the New Year holidays make it difficult to get close enough to the donation box to drop a coin in, so some people throw their offerings instead. A close look at the lower edge of the roof reveals many errant coins lodged in the shingles.