

Stone Lanterns

More than 600 custom-made stone lanterns line the paths around Sumiyoshi Taisha. Almost all of them were donated by merchants or business associations and are engraved with the names of their donors. Donations of lanterns, which became popular in the early 1700s, had two main purposes: to win the favor of the gods of Sumiyoshi Taisha and to advertise the donors' businesses.

The lanterns were donated from a wide range of industries, but many are from people and organizations connected with the sea. For centuries, Osaka Bay lay just beyond the shrine's western gate, and people whose livelihood depends on the sea have long sought blessings from the three maritime gods enshrined at Sumiyoshi Taisha. Smaller Sumiyoshi shrines that honor the same deities dot the Japanese coast; Sumiyoshi Taisha is considered to be the head shrine of all Sumiyoshi shrines.

Naniwa harbor near Sumiyoshi Taisha was the hub that connected the Kansai region with the Seto Inland Sea and beyond. Between the seventh and ninth centuries, it was the departure point for trade and diplomatic missions to China. Later, in the Edo period (1603–1867), it served as the base for an important domestic trade route on the Sea of Japan. Ninety-six lanterns associated with maritime activities, such as fishing and shipping, were donated to Sumiyoshi Taisha between 1716 and 1736.

Many of the stone lanterns on the shrine grounds were donated by merchants as Sumiyoshi Taisha was well called a place to pray for safe voyages. *Kitamaebune* merchant ships connected Osaka to Hokkaido during the mid- to late nineteenth century and helped shape Japan's modern economy and culture. *Kitamaebune* traders brought kelp harvested from the cold waters of Hokkaido back to Osaka, where the city's cooks embraced its distinctive umami flavor, creating *kombu dashi*, the kelp stock that is a basic ingredient in Japanese cuisine.

Sharp-eyed visitors can find lanterns donated by manufacturers of indigo dye, fertilizer, and glass; safflower wholesalers; and dealers in used clothing. The largest lanterns, however, were not donated by seafarers, but by an association of toy and doll manufacturers. They are hard to miss, standing over 10 meters tall on either side of Sorihashi Bridge. The two lanterns were originally donated in 1762, but they have been refurbished and enlarged many times. On four occasions since 1928, they have been hoisted up and given new, larger stone bases to make room for additional donor names. The most recent addition took place in 2020, to mark the crowning of the new emperor and the start of the Reiwa era. The southern lantern represents companies from the Osaka area, while the one to the north is for companies from Tokyo and other parts of Japan. Fans of Japanese action figures and other toys will find names that are familiar alongside many that are obscure or forgotten.