

Gangōji Institute for Research of Cultural Property

Gangōji Temple is one of the oldest Buddhist institutions in Japan, and its history spans well over a millennium. Over the centuries, the temple has collected many tens of thousands of artifacts. Combined with the surviving architecture, building materials, and written records of the temple, the artifacts are an invaluable source of historical information for historians, archaeologists, and Buddhist scholars. The Gangōji Institute for Research of Cultural Property was formed in 1967 to preserve and research these items. It has since become a leading organization for the excavation, preservation, and study of historical artifacts in Japan.

The Institute was born from a remarkable discovery. By the turn of the twentieth century, Gangōji had been almost completely abandoned. The temple buildings were in disrepair, and most of the complex had been destroyed or otherwise lost. Restoration of the temple began in 1943 under the leadership of a monk named Tsujimura Taien (1919–1978). Tsujimura set to work organizing repairs to the **Zenshitsu**, followed by the **Gokurakudō** and other central buildings. His commitment to revitalizing the temple was absolute, and he worked fiercely to raise the necessary funding for the repairs—at one time even declaring that, if necessary, he would sell the **Miniature Five-Story Pagoda**. Through Tsujimura's efforts, the government agreed to provide the necessary funds. Gangōji was reborn, but the repairs ultimately saved more than the temple buildings. In 1961, during the process of excavating the temple grounds to install fire-protection systems, a trove of twelfth- to seventeenth-century artifacts was uncovered. These included documents, statues, and centuries-old Buddhist artifacts—approximately 100,000 items in total. It was a monumental discovery.

Of the artifacts, more than 65,000 items were significant material examples of Buddhist worship and the folk beliefs of the common people. In 1967, this group of items was designated an Important Tangible Folk Cultural Property. That same year, the Gangōji Institute for Research of Buddhist and Folklore Relics (later the Gangōji Institute for Research of Cultural Property) was formed to study the artifacts.

One of the Institute's most important activities is researching the proper preservation of historic objects and architecture. After decades or centuries underground, artifacts—especially wood or textiles—can warp or shrink after they are unearthed. To preserve these objects, the Institute pioneered the use of polyacrylamide treatments, which strengthen fibers by coating them in a thin layer of plastic. It was the first in Japan to use this process. The Institute continued to research and develop more effective methods of preservation, and its members have since worked on the preservation of many important cultural properties, including some National Treasures.

Some of the artifacts uncovered at Gangōji are displayed in a small exhibit space on the third floor of the Hōrinkan. This area also contains sections of ancient lumber and other relics of the temple's history. Several of these items show interesting or noteworthy ways in which folk practices have been combined with Buddhist belief. For example, one exhibit contains *monoimi-fuda*, wooden talismans that people carried or affixed to their doors to indicate a period of ritual abstinence (*monoimi*). This could include abstinence from meat and other foods that were believed to stimulate worldly desires. Buddhist laypeople often used *monoimi* as a way to cleanse themselves of the impurity associated with death, and these talismans were also often attached to the door of the deceased or placed next to the body.

The exhibit in the Hōrinkan also contains several examples of miniature wooden stupas (*tōba*) created for people whose remains were interred in the Gokurakudō. The custom of creating stupas for the deceased stems from the original purpose of stupas as reliquaries for relics of Shakyamuni, the historical Buddha. For someone of the eleventh or twelfth century, being interred near **Chikō's Mandala** in the Gokurakudō and marked with a stupa would have been very costly, but it was likely also seen as a way to guarantee rebirth in the Pure Land.

As the Gangōji Institute for Research of Cultural Property has evolved, it has come to handle a wide variety of archaeological artifacts, such as ancient texts and records, statuary, stonework, and more. The Institute has become a private organization whose members now include not only historians, but also literary scholars, archaeologists, preservationists, and other experts in various fields of cultural and natural sciences. Their efforts continue to play a vital role in the preservation and study of Japanese history.