

## **Shiramizu Falls**

Shiramizu Falls in Hakusan National Park was the main tourist attraction in Shirakawa-go before the area became famous for its traditional *gassho*-style farmhouses, and has been considered a sacred site among Buddhist ascetics since at least medieval times. The 72-meter falls were shaped by an eruption of Mt. Haku some 2,200 years ago, when lava flowed down the slopes and hardened above what is now the Oshira River, forming steep cliffs. The vertical and horizontal breaks that can be seen in these cliffs were caused by the lava interacting with air. The primeval forest around the falls is dotted with giant beeches, oaks, katsura trees, and Japanese horse-chestnut (*tochi*; *Aesculus turbinata*) trees.

The main trail from the direction of Shirakawa to the summit of Mt. Haku goes past Shiramizu Falls. This means the falls were known to generations of Buddhist ascetics, who began using the mountain as a training ground as early as the eighth century. These devotees would ascend to the summit and often spend extended periods of time on the slopes to practice spiritual discipline. In medieval times, those who worshiped Mt. Haku often depicted the mountain and its surroundings in the form of mandalas, or visual representations of Buddhist cosmology. In these pictures, the area around Shiramizu Falls represented a spiritual boundary separating the sacred peak from the world of mortals.

The significance of Shiramizu Falls as a site of worship was underlined by the discovery of handheld bronze mirrors from the medieval period in the vicinity of the falls and elsewhere along the Mt. Haku trail during the construction of the Oshirakawa Dam, completed upstream on the Oshira River in 1963. Decorated with relief representations of auspicious plants and Buddhist motifs, such mirrors are known to have been left by devotees in places of religious significance, including the summit of Mt. Haku, where they have been unearthed in large numbers.