

Aoi Aso Jinja Shrine

Aoi Aso Jinja is the oldest extant shrine in the Hitoyoshi Kuma region. It dates from 806 and bears similarities in layout to the imperial palace of that time in Heiankyo (now Kyoto), which was built in 794. Most of the current shrine buildings date from 1610 and are a blend of several architectural styles with some unusual decorative details. These styles and details are used consistently across the structures, creating a distinct aesthetic that can be observed in later shrines throughout southern Kyushu. This consistency of design is uncommon among historic shrines since most shrines include buildings dating from different periods. The *romon* gate, the *haiden* worship hall, and the *heiden* and *honden* halls and the corridor connecting them are collectively designated a National Treasure.

Example of cultural refinement

The shrine is laid out on a north-south axis with mountains to the north, a river to the east, a pond to the south, and a road to the west. This follows the principles of the five elements (*wuxing*), the ancient conceptual scheme forming the basis of Chinese geomancy and feng shui. Heiankyo (Kyoto) had been built 12 years earlier, following the same principles. These shared traits demonstrate an unusual level of cultural sophistication for a territory so far from the capital.

An iconic symbol of the shrine

The approach to the worship hall passes through the two-story *romon* gate. The gate is 12 meters high, with a steeply angled thatch roof. The transoms are decorated with dynamic carvings, including episodes from a series of Confucian teachings (the Twenty-Four Exemplars of Filial Piety) and a pair of carved white faces at each of the four corners. The carved faces are the only known carvings of their kind in Japan and represent the emotions of pleasure, anger, sorrow, and joy.

Dynamic carvings

Confucian themes are continued across the worship hall and the other structures. They appear alongside carvings of mythical lions frolicking among peonies, dragons emerging from clouds, and delicate renderings of wisteria and other blossoms. The imagery is opulent and auspicious, in a style common during the Momoyama period (1573–1615).

A rare confluence of styles

The Momoyama aesthetic blends with design details popular during the flourishing of Zen Buddhism in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. These include cusped oval panels, the stepped bracket systems supporting tail rafters extending far into the eaves, and ornamentation at the ends of tie beams. Motifs from Shingon Buddhism appear on the doors of the *honden* main hall, and panels around the sides of the shrine's halls are decorated with crossed wood battens, a feature not commonly seen in shrine architecture outside of the Hitoyoshi Kuma region.