

## **Buddhist Artwork and a Legacy of Cultural Preservation**

Numerous faiths and beliefs have taken root in the Hitoyoshi Kuma region and are still maintained as part of the area's cultural heritage. The Sagara family who ruled Hitoyoshi Kuma continuously for nearly 700 years brought stability to the region and fostered a strong culture of preserving the region's wealth of cultural assets, including shrines, temples, and Buddhist artwork, some of which date from the Nara (710–794) and Heian (794–1185) periods.

The Sagara were originally from the area of present-day Shizuoka Prefecture and were appointed to govern Hitoyoshi by the Kamakura shogun Minamoto no Sanetomo (1192–1219). Rather than imposing an entirely new set of values and beliefs, as many regional rulers did in pre-modern Japan, the Sagara protected and preserved the existing local culture. A strong tradition of cultural preservation developed in the region and is evidenced by the volume and quality of cultural assets, as well as community-driven traditions such as the Sagara 33 Kannon Pilgrimage.

The pilgrimage is held on the day of the spring equinox and for seven days over the autumn equinox. It actually includes 35 worship sites dedicated to Kannon, the bodhisattva of compassion, although certain sites share the same pilgrimage circuit numbers, which run from 1 to 33. The pilgrimage sites include worship halls on the grounds of temples and miniature halls beside rice fields and in woods, many of which are maintained by the local community. The pilgrimage periods are very festive as members of the community share food and drink with their neighbors and with visiting pilgrims.