

Rakuzan'en Garden

The Rakuzan'en Garden is located on the former grounds of a villa once owned by the Osakaya Miwa family, who were wealthy merchants in the Edo period (1603–1867). The garden is laid out on a steep slope, and the main building was designed to command a panoramic view of the surrounding town and mountains. In mid-May, when the many azalea bushes are in bloom, a light-up event is held at Rakuzan'en after sunset that includes a tea service, concerts, and other performances.

Rakuzantei and the Garden Grounds

A path lined with castle-like retaining walls leads up to the Rakuzantei house, which was built in 1892 by the 11th head of the Osakaya Miwa family. Though the structure may appear simple, skillful craftsmanship was employed to create an elegant and comfortable place for entertaining guests. For example, some of the pillars on the veranda were omitted to provide a better view of the town below, and decorative touches in the sitting rooms, bathroom, and hallways were designed to delight guests. Significant investment went into subtle elements of the house and the front garden, such as stones specially brought from around the country and rare woods used in the tokonoma alcoves.

Further up the slope is Sekisui'an, a replica of a tea house that is now preserved at the Northern Culture Museum in the city of Niigata. Past Sekisui'an is a small Kannon Hall that enshrines a statue of Kannon, the bodhisattva of compassion, in the eleven-headed form. The sculpture is thought to have been carved in the fourteenth century.

The Osakaya Miwa Family

The Miwa family belonged to the warrior class before moving to Nagaoka and finding employment with the Osakaya merchant family. They were eventually granted permission to set up a branch shop in Yoita (now part of Nagaoka). The family grew wealthy by operating merchant ships that transported rice, salt, and seafood to Kyoto and Osaka and brought back textiles, medicines, books, and other goods. In the mid-eighteenth century, the Osakaya Miwa were regarded as one of the wealthiest merchant families in the country.

Poet-Monk Ryokan

The Osakaya Miwa family maintained a friendship with Ryokan (1758–1831), a famous Soto Zen Buddhist monk, poet, and calligrapher. Ryokan was born near Nagaoka and spent a large part of his life as a hermit in the region. He sometimes visited the villa and

was particularly close with Ikyoni and Saichi, the daughter and the younger brother of the sixth head of the family, respectively. Saichi eventually became Ryokan's disciple.

Two memorial stones in the Rakuzan'en Garden bear words written by Ryokan. One reproduces a letter sent to Ikyoni while the monk was traveling, asking her to take care of her health during the cold winter. The other quotes Ryokan's writings after Saichi's death, in which the poet-monk thinks about the coming spring that he must spend without his dear friend.