

## Shoboji Temple

There are many Buddhist statues enshrined at Shoboji Temple, and the most unusual is a sculpture of Kannon, the bodhisattva of compassion, with three faces. The temple is also well known for a dry landscape garden with rocks that represent animals, and for a series of painted screens depicting the Nishiyama mountains on the western side of Kyoto. Shoboji is located near Oharano Jinja Shrine and belongs to the Toji branch of the Shingon school of Buddhism.

### *Hoshoen Garden and Hoshoden Hall*

The Hoshoen is a combination of a dry landscape garden and a pond-viewing garden. The view extends beyond the outer wall to encompass the Kyoto cityscape and Higashiyama mountains, incorporating them as “borrowed scenery” (*shakkei*). The shapes of the stones placed in the carefully raked white sand and around the pond resemble birds and animals, giving the garden its other name, “rock garden of birds and beasts.” A total of 16 stones represent 16 different animals from around the world, including a lion, a frog, and even a penguin. A picture guide in the Hoshoden Hall helps visitors find and identify them all. The ever-changing garden invites quiet contemplation with its weeping cherry tree that blooms pink in spring, lush green moss and water lilies in summer, brightly colored maple leaves in autumn, and white snow in winter.

The Hoshoden Hall facing the garden contains a statue of Aizen Myo-o, a Wisdom King depicted with six arms and three eyes, who is believed to grant strong relationships and marital harmony. A relatively rare sculpture of a running Daikokuten, one of the Seven Gods of Fortune, portrays the deity in mid-stride, as if hurrying to bring happiness to people.

### *Hondo (Main Hall)*

The largest statue on the altar is the principal object of worship, Sanmen Senju Kannon. This image of a thousand-armed Kannon has three faces to represent the bodhisattva’s ability to watch over the present, the past, and the future. The gold-plated wooden sculpture is 1.8 meters tall and dates to the early Kamakura period (1185–1333). It is a nationally designated Important Cultural Property.

To the right is a statue of Kannon in a human form. It is called Sho Kannon and is the oldest sculpture in Shoboji. The Shingon school founder Kukai (Kobo Daishi, 774–835)

is said to have carved it when he was 42, hoping to protect himself from misfortune at an age traditionally considered inauspicious in a man's life. Further right is a Muromachi-period (1336–1573) sculpture of Dainichi, the cosmic Buddha. To the left of Sanmen Senju Kannon are two statues of Amida, the Buddha of Infinite Light and Life, also carved in the Muromachi period. Visitors can press a button near the prayer area to hear explanations in Japanese, or read the English leaflet posted in the hall.

### *Sliding Screen Paintings*

The Oharano-born artist Nishii Sayoko (1947–2000) was commissioned to paint 41 sliding screens for the temple's *shoin* reception rooms with scenes of the Nishiyama landscape. She managed to finish 17 pieces while fighting a terminal illness, and the rest were completed based on her sketches. The *Ode to Nishiyama* painted screens are a manifestation of Nishii's love for her hometown, depicting seasonal flowers, plants, and mountains covered with spring greenery.

### *Fudodo Hall and Temple Grounds*

At the top of a flight of stairs flanked by two Nio guardian statues is the Fudodo Hall. It enshrines Kasuga Fudo Myo-o, the Immovable Wisdom King, who is believed to grant safety and prosperity, recovery from illness, and protection from evil. The hall provides a good vantage point to take in the surroundings, including the vermilion Henjoto Pagoda. Behind the Fudodo is Kasuga Inari Shrine, where people pray for commercial success and prosperity. An arched red bridge past the shrine leads to a small waterfall.

Another dry landscape garden lies between the temple's main gate and the Hondo. On the hillside beyond the gate is an *ume* plum orchard with more than 100 trees. They bloom white and pink from February to mid-March with the Higashiyama mountain range in the distance and attract many birds, including Japanese white-eyes (*mejiro*).

### *Brief History*

In the eighth century, the Chinese monk Chii Daitoku came to Japan to help propagate Buddhism. He built a hermitage called Kasuga Zenbo in Oharano in 754 to pursue his ascetic practices. Around the year 800, Saicho (Dengyo Daishi, 767–822), the founder of Japan's Tendai school of Buddhism, made Kasuga Zenbo a subtemple of a larger temple that he established for protection of the Nagaokakyo area. Like most structures in Kyoto, the temple burned down during the Onin War (1467–1477), but was restored in 1615 and

renamed Shoboji. Later, it was expanded with substantial contributions from Keishoin (1627–1705), mother of the fifth Tokugawa shogun, Tsunayoshi.