

Tateyama Mandalas

Tateyama mandalas are elaborate paintings that provide a cohesive explanation of the Tateyama faith as it was understood and practiced during the Edo period (1603–1867). The images were created in a time when ascending the sacred peaks of Mt. Tate became possible for people who had not undergone religious training, and they were intended to illustrate the tenets of the faith in an approachable manner. Like traditional mandalas, they are visual representations of Buddhist doctrine and cosmology, but make use of simple and colorful imagery that would have been widely familiar at the time.

A Tateyama mandala consists of five key elements. The story starts with the birth of the faith as expressed through the legend of Saeki Ariyori, an eighth-century figure considered the first person to engage in ascetic practice on the mountain. The elements of hell, heaven, and various other landscapes along the route to the summit are depicted to symbolize a pilgrim's spiritual journey passing through the netherworld on the mountain's slopes before achieving rebirth at the peak. The last element is the Nunobashi bridge at the foot of the mountain, which represents a spiritual boundary separating the sacred ground from the world of mortals. The bridge was also where women, who were prohibited from entering the mountain, would conduct a ritual that was believed to grant them the same blessings that an ascent to the peak would bring.

Approximately 50 Tateyama mandalas from the Edo period remain in existence. These images have been discovered throughout Japan—a reminder of how they functioned as tools in the propagation of the Tateyama faith. They were carried by priests from villages at the foot of Mt. Tate who traveled with the scrolls on missionary journeys, carrying their faith's message to audiences around the country.