

Seki no Yama Kaikan (Seki Float Museum)

The Seki Juku Gion Summer Festival is a religious festival associated with Seki Shrine. It began around 1700 and is still held today over a two-day period in mid-July every year. The festival is distinguished by the use of tall floats known as *yama*, written with the kanji characters for “mountain car.” While 16 such floats used to take part in the festival when the town was at its most prosperous in the nineteenth century, that number has now gone down to four. Of those four, two are on display at Seki no Yama Kaikan.

These two-story-high floats can be more than 6 meters tall and weigh as much as 6 tons. Their heavy carved bases are made of oak, with an upper body of Japanese zelkova. A shaft for maneuvering can be attached to either end of the float, while the upper part of the structure can be rotated, depending on which direction the float needs to go. The floats were built to be as imposing as possible, filling up to 2.5 meters of the space they pass through (on a road that is only around 3 meters wide) and looming higher than the eaves of the houses they pass.

The floats belong to associations representing different quarters of the town of Seki Juku. The two on display in the museum are from Nakamachi-Yonbancho and Kozaki. Decorated with gold leaf and lacquer and featuring a check-pattern *washi* paper roof, the Nakamachi-Yonbancho float is strikingly extravagant in appearance. Although shorter and plainer than that of Nakamachi-Yonbancho, the Kozaki float has a greater surface area, with a large protruding stage at the front for musicians to perform on.

The museum also features exhibits of the festival’s paraphernalia: the costumes of the four different float associations, the decorated paper lanterns, and the heavy embroidered curtains that adorn the back and sides of the floats.

A video with footage of the actual festival is available for viewing as well. It includes the “stage rotation” (*butai-mawashi*), when the upper parts of the floats are turned at high speed as the musicians play and the illuminated paper lanterns spin around furiously. Another noteworthy feature is the primitive humanoid robot (*karakuri ningyo*) of the Shinto priest clutching bundles of *sasa* bamboo grass on the upper story of the Kitaura float.

Seki no Yama Kaikan is open from 9 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. Tuesday through Sunday. There is a discount for purchasing a joint entry ticket to these three museums: the Seki no Yama Kaikan, the Sekijuku Hatago Tamaya Historical Museum, and the Seki Machinami Museum.