

Treasures of the Imperial Family: Sannomaru Shozokan

Passed down over generations by members of the Imperial Family, many of the items at the Museum of the Imperial Collections Sannomaru Shozokan rank among Japan's most valuable masterpieces. The museum's collection ranges from calligraphy, handscrolls, and folding screens to sculptures, ceramics, and swords.

The museum was first established within the grounds of the Imperial Palace in 1989, when the Imperial Family donated approximately 6,500 pieces of art to the government following the passing of Emperor Showa (1901–1989). It was opened to the public in 1993. Additional gifts from Prince Chichibu, Empress Kojun, Prince Takamatsu, and Prince Mikasa have since expanded the museum's collection. Many of these pieces are made from perishable materials such as wood, paper, or silk. Because age has made them extremely fragile, most pieces are put on display only for a limited time.

Fewer than half of the pieces in the Shozokan's collection have been shown to the public—leaving thousands of never-before-seen treasures awaiting their turn. Each exhibition thus becomes a unique experience that calls to mind the Japanese concept of *ichigo ichie*. Often translated as “a once-in-a-lifetime encounter,” *ichigo ichie* refers to life's fleeting, unrepeatable moments. Because no two exhibitions are the same, visitors may never see the same artwork twice.

The collection can be split up into three main categories: pre-1868 artworks, post-1868 Japanese artworks, and post-1868 non-Japanese artworks. The pre-1868 portion of the collection contains works of art that date to at least the fourth century BCE, but many of the pieces were obtained during the Edo period (1603–1867), when Japan was ruled by the Tokugawa shogunate. With the restoration of the emperor's political power in 1868, the Imperial Family commissioned many works of art as part of an effort to modernize the nation. The new Japanese state was also gifted many items from other countries as it expanded diplomatic relations after more than 200 years of isolation.

The Shozokan is located within the larger Imperial Palace grounds, which encompass what was once Edo Castle, the seat of power for the Tokugawa shogunate. After the end of the shogunate in 1868, the emperor was restored to power and moved from Kyoto to the new capital, Tokyo, taking up residence in Edo Castle. Many locations within the modern Imperial Palace retain names from the castle's original structures, including Sannomaru Shozokan. The museum was

built within what was once Edo Castle's *sannomaru*, or third bailey, the area bordered by the castle's outermost fortified wall.

The renovated museum was designed to echo the style of the Imperial Palace. The new building blends modern simplicity with traditional architectural elements, such as diamond-patterned motifs on the walls, the verdigris of the copper roofs, and decorative chains that funnel rainwater from the eaves.

The Shozokan shares with the public a trove of art that went largely unseen for centuries. Following the death of Emperor Showa and the beginning of the Heisei era in 1989, the Imperial Family made special effort to become closer to the general populace. The founding of the Shozokan was a significant step. The museum's large collection provides a record of the history and aesthetic tastes of Japan's Imperial Family and stands as a monument to their central role in the arts for over a millennium. The same works of art that delighted an emperor's eye a thousand years ago may now be seen by everyone in Sannomaru Shozokan.