

National Treasure

# Sanjūsangen-dō

国宝 三十三間堂



## A History of This Building

This holy building “Rengeō-in,” popularly called “Sanjūsangen-dō,” was founded in 1164 A.D. at the demand of the Emperor Goshirakawa, who was not only a pious devotee to Kannon Bodhisattva, but also an earnest sovereign in his attempt to bring about peace by spreading Buddhistic faith throughout the country.

The common name “Sanjūsangen-dō” means “A Hall of thirty-three bays.” The number “33” is derived from the belief that Kannon Bodhisattva saves all mankind by disguising himself as 33 different figures. So the architectural plan of this hall is based on arranging 1,001 Kannon statues on the vast altar with 33 bays (one between pillars). The hall itself consists of 35 bays on the east side and 5 bays on the north side.

However, the hall was burnt down in 1249, and then Emperor Gosaga issued an order to reconstruct another in the very same style as the original building and the arrangement of 1,001 Kannon. The new building and 1,032 statues as seen today were completed in 1266 A.D.

The building is 390 ft. long and 54 ft. wide. The gradually curved tiled roof peculiar to Japanese temples is grand indeed. At the south boundary of the premises is the grand gate and the Taiko earthen wall. They were built in about 1590 A.D. and are of the Momoyama style.

In addition to them, another plastered wall and some red gates were constructed recently on the east side, and are of Kamakura style. The whole grounds including the holy hall in the center are in good order.



in spring



in autumn



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"Keshou-yaneura" Construction

### "Keshou-yaneura" Construction

"Keshou-yaneura" is a construction style including the beams, rafters and under-space of temple roofs. The ceiling is not flat, but angled and is supported by a special structure of exposed, white-painted wooden beams. This gives the space under the roof the appearance of an attic (Yaneura) when viewed from the floor. "Keshou-yaneura" is a traditional construction style which has been prevalently used since the Nara Period (710-794), and nowhere is it more exquisitely represented than at Sanjūsangendō.



Section of restored colors



Coloration left under the wooden disks

### The Richly Colored Hall

At the time of construction, the interior of this hall was beautifully decorated with a sea of colors. When the hall was dismantled during the early part of the Showa Period (i.e., the early 20th century), richly colored paintings of clouds and flower petals were discovered under the wooden disks attached to the lower ends of the beams. The rafters and pillars also revealed similar Buddhist patterns. (One portion of these was restored some years ago by the Agency for Cultural Affairs.)

## The principal Image of Kannon Bodhisattva (National Treasure)

In the center of the hall sits solemnly the principal image, “Ju-ichimen-Senju-Kannon (Ekadasamukhasahasrabhuja-Avalokite-svara), or Kannon with eleven faces and one thousand arms. He has 11 small faces on his head and 20 pairs of arms. This symbolizes 1,000 arms because each saves 25 worlds. The height of the image is 131 inches. This most graceful and refined image was carved by Tankei, one of the most distinguished sculptors in the Kamakura period when he was at the advanced age of 82.

In forming the statue, a technique called “Yosegi-zukuri” was applied. The method is as follows: first, a pre-constructed body is composed of many partly hollow blocks of wood, carved only roughly; second, the surface of the body is carved, third; the statue is colored or japanned (a type of lacquer), and finally plated with gold leaves.

On both sides of the central image stand in regular order one thousand images of Kannon Bodhisattva. They are wooden and also fashioned in the yosegi-zukuri manner. They are smaller (Height: 65inches~ 66inches) and simpler in appearance than that of the principal image in the center. These 1,000 images are joint works by 70 or more sculptors under the command of the great masters, Tankei: the construction-period extended over 15 years.

It is believed that Kannon Bodhisattva can transform himself into 33 different figures. Therefore, one might look upon the total 1,001 images as the appearance of 33,033 Kannon. It is the very beauty of the numerous Kannon images that strikes the tourists as a characteristic of this hall.



The 1,000 Standing Images of Kannon (Important cultural property )



Principal Image Kannon Bodhisattva

## The 1,000 Standing Images of Thousand-Armed Kannon

The splendor of the Sanjūsangen-dō lies in the beauty of this group of one thousand images. It is recorded in one of the documents that one hundred and fifty-six of these images were rescued from the great fire of the first year of the Kencho period(1249).

In the first stage of construction of the Sanjūsangen-dō, the sculptor Kojoyo, a disciple in the fourth generation of the line of the famous sculptor Jocho, his heir Kocho, Kocho's younger brother Kokei and his real son Unkei, all worked on the creation of the Kannon images. In the second stage, after the great fire, over seventy sculptors under the leadership of Unkei's son Tankei, participated in the project. Among these we find the names Koen, Ryuen, Shoen, Eien, Inkei, Insho, Inga and Gyokai.

All the images were made by three schools called Keiha, Inpa and Enpa-school. In Showa 32(1957) the basic repairs to the images were finally finished and the restoration was now considered complete. When one considers both Kannon's ability to change into thirty-three different forms in response to the individual's needs, and his deep compassion for all sentient beings, one can see the embodiment of 33,033 manifestations of the Bodhisattva in these 1001 statues. It is popular since the end of the Heian period, to worship great numbers of images, to make Buddhists come over and over again, and to create numerous images and pagodas. More than that, the multiple images of the Sanjūsangen-dō causes one to feel a deep sense of intimacy with Kannon, such that there is the common belief that one can find the face of a loved one amongst the many images.









#### Senju-Kannon figure No.40

This wooden figure was made by Tankei, the great chief sculptor, at the time of the reconstruction of this hall. Just nine of his works remain among the thousand statues here. Each of them is similar in style to the statue No.40 .



#### Senju-Kannon figure No.50

This wooden figure was made by Koen, the successor to chief sculptor Tankei. His signature is carved under the statue's foot.



No.140 : made by Inga



No.330 : made by Ryuen



No.160 : made in Heian period



### **Open-mouthed laughing face behind his head No 530**

Meaning ; To use laughter to lead people who are of sound mind away from doing evil things.

### **One thousand eyes : in his palm**

The Senju-Kannon have one eye in each of their forty palms, each of which can see into 25 worlds. Therefore, represent 1,000 eyes.



The powerful and dynamic statues of the Thunder God and the Wind God are placed at either side of the temple hall on raised pedestals of cloud shape. The images of these gods derived from people's fear of and gratitude for nature in the old days. People worshipped them as deities who controlled rain and wind, and brought about good harvests.

These statues are representative masterpiece sculptures of the Kamakura period (12th-14th centuries).



(God of Wind) Height: 44 inches



Raijin(Varuna / God of Thunder) Height: 39 inches



Nijuhachi-bushu/The 28 guardian deities of kannon (National Treasure : Kamakura period)

These are gods or spirits of beauty, wisdom, prosperity, charity, strength and so on. They attend to Kannon and protect believers from many obstacles, or save them from all dangers. Each statue is carved out of wood and colored. They are presumably regarded as works by the school of Tankei. In creating these figures the sculptors aimed at surpassing the vivid dynamic reality of the human body.

### Daibenkudoku-ten (Śrī-devī)

This figure is heavenly maid clothed in bluish-purple robe waving softly about. You might take considerable interest in the fact that the very same artist who succeeded in expressing this mood of elegance and refinement could also magnificently produce all other sculptures of wild and sturdy appearance. Height:65 inches.



### **Konpira (Kumbhira)**

Originally it was a crocodile in the Ganges River, which was deified in the form of the water god in the Indian folk belief. Later on, it was adopted in Buddhism as a guardian deity of Shaka (Sakya-muni or Buddha). Height:61 inches.



### **Kinnara (Kimnara)**

In ancient Indian mythology, this deity was introduced as a half-god and half-bird, which lives on the Himaraya Mountains and sings in a beautiful voice.

In Buddhism, it is a deity of music and an attendant of Taishaku-ten (Indra) or Bishamon-ten (Vaisravana). Height:64 inches.



**Toho-ten  
(Dhṛtarāṣṭra)**

The original Sanskrit name of the deity is “Dhṛtarāṣṭra” which means “ the holder or the owner of a country ”.

This deity is believed to live in the north of Mt. Shumisen and guard the east together with two other Buddhist deities, Kendatsuba and Bishaja. Height:65 inches.





**Birubakusha  
(Virūpakṣa)**

Another brave god who presided over the Paradise in the West. The right half of the breast-plate on his chest battered by his outthrusting right arm.

Height:63 inches.



**Karura  
(Garuda)**

In ancient India it was believed to be a gigantic bird which ate cobras and carried the Hindu deity Vishnu on its back. Later on, it was adopted in Buddhism as a deity and was included in the Eight Guardians. This statue represents a bird-headed figure with wings, playing the flute. Height: 64.5 inches.



**Basu-sennin  
(Vasu)**

Vasu is a hermit. He goes continuously on a pilgrimage through the wilderness, taking with him, 9,200 million sinful men and women whom he has saved out of Hades. He is indeed lonely and unworldly man in appearance owing to his strict religious practices in pursuit of Buddhistic truth and charity. Height: 61 inches.



**Ashura  
(Asura)**

Ashura the wicked god, has passion for fighting. He has three faces and six arms.  
Height: 65 inches.



**Magora  
(Mahoraga)**

The god of serpent or a dragon. This god has five eyes and plays a lute.  
Height: 61 inches.



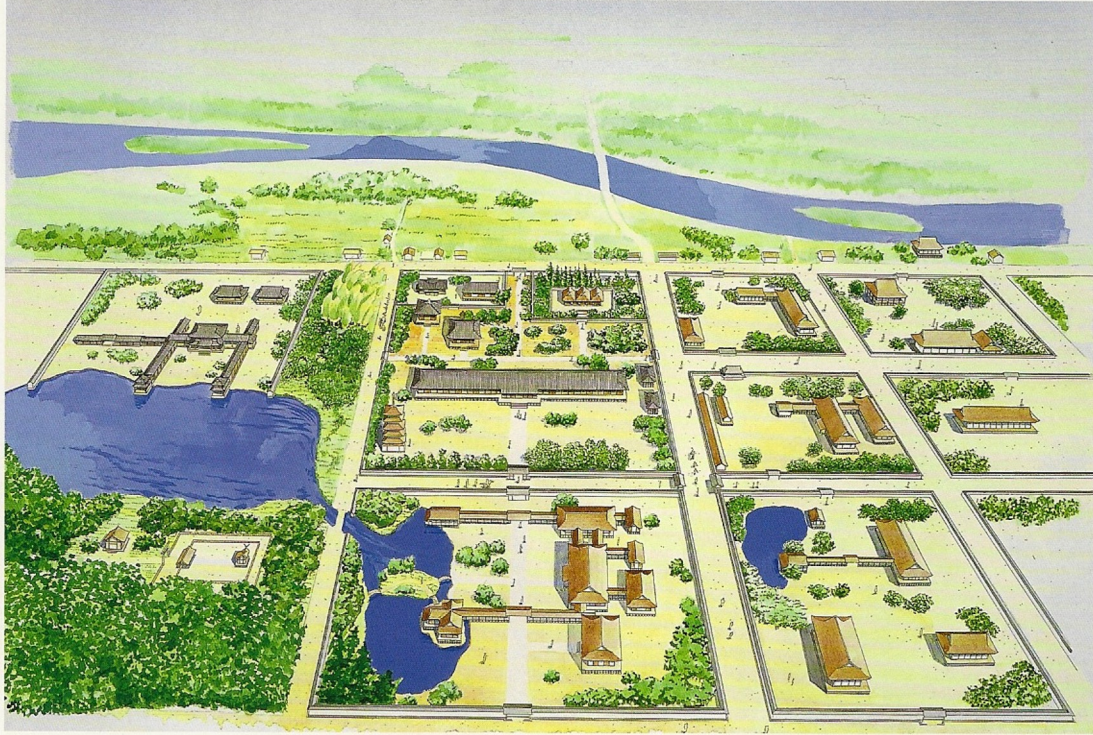
**Sanji-taisho** The brave general punishing the wicked with a sword. Height: 65 inches.  
(Sanjaya)



**Missha-kongo** This figure in the shape of wrestler is made of wood. He was a patron deity of the (Vajra-Pāni) people who were converted to Buddhism. Height : 66 inches.



**Naraen-keno (Nārāyaṇa)** The deity god of great physical strength, defending believers against evils.  
Height : 66 inches.



### Original Site of Ho-juji Palace (Restoration)

This is the original site of the Imperial Palace built by Ex-Emperor Goshirakawa in 1161. He and his wife lived here for about 20 years. Sanjūsangen-dō was in the central part of the site. In 1183, the entire palace was burnt down during the rebellion, except Sanjūsangen-dō.

#### When to Visit

There is no best season for visiting Sanjūsangen-dō; it's marvelous at any time of the year. However, try visiting in the morning, soon after the hall opens, on a day with clear skies. You can catch the sight of the sun glinting off of the burnished gold of the images of Kannon, the Buddhist Goddesses of Mercy, and inside the temple it is a veritable forest of Buddhist icons.





# Portrait of Ex-Emperor Goshirakawa

The retired Emperor Goshirakawa entered the Buddhist priesthood and held Insei (rule by ex-emperors). He was pious enough in Kannon to erect the original temple of Sanjūsangen-dō in 1164. He was also a cultured man who compiled an anthology of ballads. His tomb is to the east of Sanjūsangen-dō.

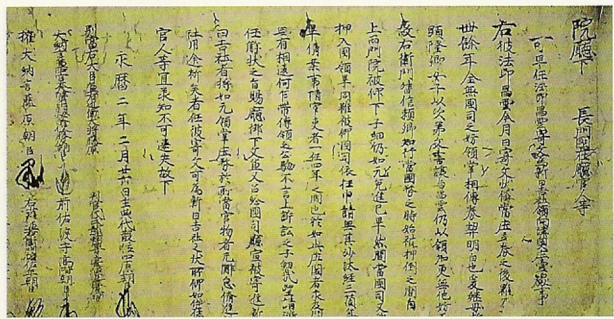


Portrait (Important cultural property : Kamakura period)

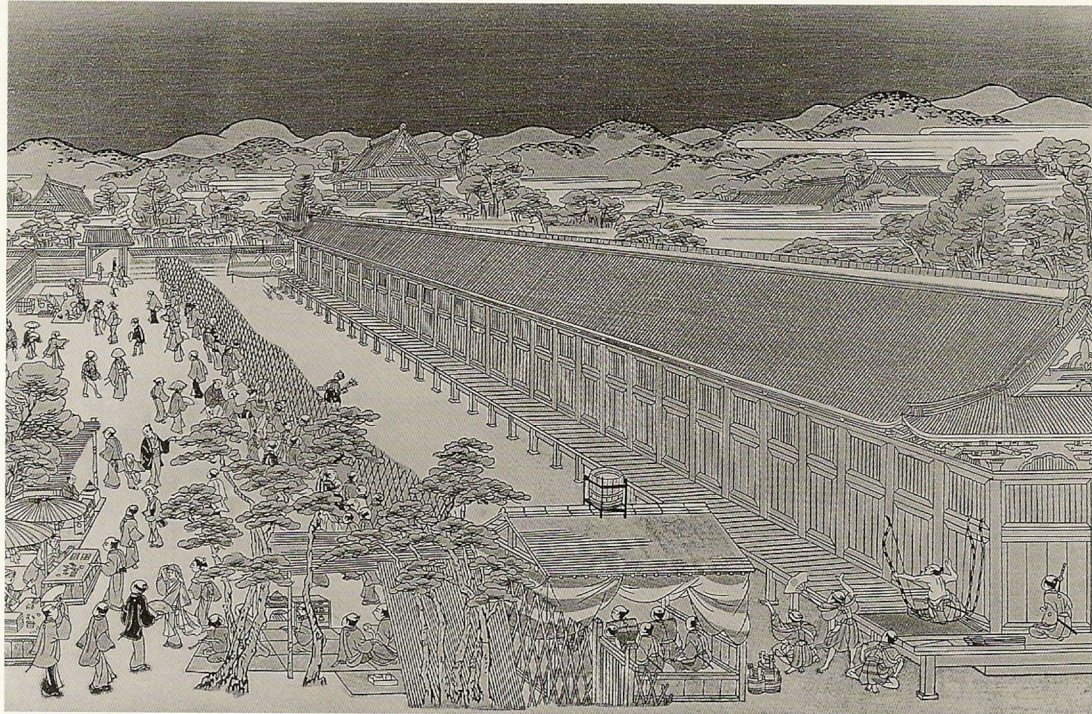


# Honen's Stone Monument (Kamakura period)

This stone monument was built by Priest Honen, founder of the Jodo sect of Buddhism, to commemorate the 13th anniversary of Ex-Emperor Goshirakawa's death.



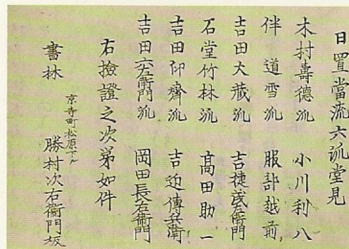
Writing Issued by Ex-Emperor Goshirakawa Government (Heian period)



Toh-shiya (Japan print : Edo period)



Tablet Praising Wasa Daihachiro's Record (Edo period)



Yakazu-cho (Edo period)

This is the notebook showing the records of Toh-shiya held from 1606 to 1842.

## Toh-shiya

Toh-shiya (archery contest) was held on the west veranda of the Sanjūsangen-dō. The origin of the contest dates back to the 16th century. The man who shot the largest number of arrows from one end to the other won the contest. Wasa Daihachiro shot 8,133 out of 13,053 arrows successfully during one day in 1686. Today, an exhibition contest is held every year in January.



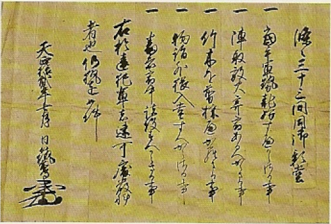
The west veranda of the Hall.  
(about 390 ft long)



Taikou-bei : Earthen wall (Important cultural property : Momoyama period)



Portrait of Toyotomi Hideyoshi



Notice Board Carrying Toyotomi Hideyoshi's Command



Minamidai-mon : South gate (Important cultural property : Momoyama period)

**Portrait of Toyotomi Hideyoshi**

The Warlord Toyotomi Hideyoshi was deified after his death in 1598 and enshrined in the Toyokuni Shrine. During his lifetime, he funded the Kyoto Daibutsu (Great Buddha Hall, which was also called Hokoji Temple), built on the north side of Sanjūsangen-dō became a part of that temple.



Yoji-josuiku

## Yoji-josuiku

Yoji-josuiku (incantation using willow stick), the most important ritual of Sanjūsangen-dō in the 12th century. Willow was once believed to work as a pain-killer. That is why willow stick and sacred water are sprinkled over visitors at the ritual, asking Buddha for the expulsion of illness and evils.

Today, it is held every year in January.



Archery contest

## "Toh-shiya" - Contest of Japanese Archery

The "Toh-shiya" or "piercing arrow" is an annual Japanese archery contest which draws roughly 2,000 participants from throughout the country (and is held on the same day as the Buddhist ritual of "Yanagi-no-okaji"). Young women participants (celebrating their coming-of-age) dressed in gorgeous kimono make this event a vibrant New Year's tradition.



Saito-goma

## "Saito-goma" - Buddhist Prayer Stick Burning Ritual

In "Saito-goma", mountain priests pray for peace as they light a holy fire to burn the prayer sticks upon which worshippers have written their wishes and desires. It is believed that the holy fire represents the cleansing fire of the Buddha's wisdom to purify the worshippers' spirit, bring them good fortune, and ward off evil. This ritual is still performed today and is held twice a year in November and February.

## Story of Munagi (In Edo period)

This story tells that willow tree was used as a ridgepole, the most important column in a temple or house, in Sanjūsangen-dō to pray to Buddha for the Ex-Emperor Goshirakawa's recovery from illness. The story was performed in Joh-ruri (reciting popular ballads) and is represented in wood-cut prints.



Story of Munagi(Japan print)