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THE WORLD HERITAGE SHRINES and TEMPLES of NIKKO 世界遺産 日光の社寺

文化庁 Agency for Cultural Affairs, Government of Japan

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Syncretism of Shinto and Buddhism

Treasure of Humankind:
"World Heritage"

NIKKO

Karamon Gate of Nikko Toshogu Shrine

Taiyuin Mausoleum of Nikko-zan Rinnoji Temple

Main Shrine of Nikko Futarasan Shrine

Nio guardian statue standing inside the front gate of Nikko Toshogu Shrine

"NIKKO": Sanctuary of Syncretism of Shinto and Buddhism

~ History of Harmonization of Cultural Assets and Nature ~

The history of Nikko originates from the foundation of Shihonryu-ji Temple (the origin of Nikko-zan Rinnoji Temple) by Holy Priest Shodo, who decided to climb Mt. Nantai, crossing the Daiya River. After failing twice, Priest Shodo finally achieved his long-cherished hope of constructing a small shrine on the top of the mountain (the origin of the Inner Shrine of Nikko Futarasan Shrine). In addition, he built Jingu-ji Temple (later called Chuzen-ji Temple) on the northern shore of Lake Chuzen-ji, and others.
Consequently, Nikko prospered as a sanctuary of religion, "Nikko-zan," under the "syncretism of Shinto and Buddhism," where the worship of gods in high mountains smoothly harmonized with the concept of a sacred place as the Pure Land of Kannon.
During the Warring States period, many of Nikko-zan territories were confiscated by Lord Hideyoshi Toyotomi, resulting in its fall. In the Edo period, however, the first shogun, Lord Ieyasu Tokugawa, authorized the return of the Nikko-zan territories. Later, Tenkai Daisojo (Buddhist priest of the highest order) was appointed as the head priest of Nikko-zan, and devoted himself to its restoration.
Following Lord Ieyasu's will which stated his desire to be "enshrined at Nikko-zan and become a tutelary deity of Hasshu," the second shogun, Lord Hidetada, constructed Toshosha Shrine. The third shogun, Lord Iemitsu, renovated it into an exquisite shrine using the best techniques of the time. This resulted in the current Nikko Toshogu Shrine which is internationally well know today. Nikko flourished as a temple town surrounding the Toshogu Shrine. Then, after the construction of Taiyuin as the mausoleum for Lord Iemitsu, the shrine and its location prospered further under the protection of the Tokugawa shogunate.
Since the Meiji period, Nikko has been regarded as an international tourist site, where cultural assets harmonize with rich nature. In 1999, the shrines and temples of Nikko were registered as a World Heritage site.

Cover Photos

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1.Three Monkeys (Important Cultural Property) of Nikko Toshogu Shrine (Important Cultural Property)
2.Nio Statue inside the Front Gate (Important Cultural Property) of Nikko Toshogu Shrine
3.Sacred Bridge of Futarasan Shrine (Important Cultural Property)
4. Seated Statues of Amida, Senju-Kannon and Bato-Kannon in the Three Buddha Hall (Important Cultural Property) of Nikko-zan Rinnoji Temple

Nikko during the Edo Period▼

Estates Owned by Shrines of Nikko

During the Edo period in the Nikko-zan territories, the Toshogu Shrine received 10,000 koku (1 koku=150kg) of rice and the Taiyuin Mausoleum received more than 3,600 koku. These were collectively called the territories owned by the Nikko shrines and were managed by the Tokugawa shogunate.
The total area was almost equal to that of the current City of Nikko. Its total quota of rice reached 25,000 koku, equivalent to that received by a feudal lord.

1. Yomei-mon Gate: Also called "Higurashi-no-mon," meaning you will never get tired of looking at this all day long.
2. Close up of Yomeimon Gate, National Treasure. The number of sculptures on this gate alone exceeds 500.
3. Five-Story Pagoda approx. 36 m in height located on the left side behind the Stone Torii Gate.
4. After going under the Yomeimon Gate, the Karamon Gate, a National Treasure, lies right in front of you.
5. The famous sculpture known as the Three Monkeys is carved on the upper exterior wall of the sacred stable.
6. The upper sacred storehouse has two large elephant sculptures, "Imaginary Elephants."
7. The "Sleeping Cat" is the most famous among the countless sculptures of Toshogu Shrine.

Nikko Toshogu Shrine

Yearning for Peace over 400 Years

Lord Ieyasu Tokugawa stated in his will that he desired to be enshrined as a deity in a small shrine constructed in Nikko after his death. He wanted to watch the peace of the world as a tutelary deity of Hasshu. The shrine building was originally named the Toshosha Shrine and was later exquisitely rebuilt by the third shogun, Lord Iemitsu (currently called the Toshogu Shrine) and granted the title of the shrine, Toshogu, by the Imperial Court.
Nikko Toshogu Shrine celebrated its 400th anniversary in 2015. Toshogu Shrine, where Lord Ieyasu's prayer for peace is shown on sculptures throughout the site, will be further handed down to coming generations.

Detailed Sculptures Exceeding 5,100

[Yomeimon Gate] (National Treasure) • • • Photo1

Yomei-mon Gate, which may be the best-known structure in Nikko, was constructed in 1636. It is not an exaggeration to say that all the technology and decorating techniques used in sculptures, decorative fittings and colors at the beginning of the Edo period are concentrated here. This national treasure gate is also called "Higurashi-no-mon," meaning you will never get tired of looking at this all day long. More than 500 items are carved on this gate, including imaginary animals such as Chinese unicorns, dragons, dragon horses, Chinese lions and other sacred beasts. The gate is colorful yet detailed, and includes people, chrysanthemums and peonies. Even the pillars and beams supporting the structure are carved with peony arabesques and other patterns. The twelve columns painted white using a pigment made from powdered shells and carved with whirling patterns are called guri-mon. Only the left pillar situated past the gate has a reverse whirling pattern, which is called "the reverse column against evil."

[Five-Story Pagoda] (Important Cultural Property) • • • Photo3

In 1650, Tadakatsu Sakai, Lord of the Obama Domain in Wakasa Province (known today as Fukui Prefecture), donated a five-story pagoda. However, it was destroyed by fire in 1815 and then rebuilt in 1818. The interior is designed open ceiling style. The center pillar is suspended from the fourth story using chains. Accordingly, the bottom of the pillar is located about 10 cm above the stone foundation. This mechanism prevents the center pillar from piercing the roof even if the timber shrinks due to aging or the heavy roof sinks. In addition, by separating the central pillar from the pagoda body, a seismically isolated structure is achieved. This traditional structure is unique to Japan, and is said to be applied to the Tokyo Skytree as well.

[Karamon Gate/Carved Surrounding Wall]] (National Treasure) • • • Photo4

Kara-mon Gate is located as the front gate of the main shrine. During the Edo period, this gate was opened only to shogunate retainers or feudal lords ranked high enough to be granted an audience with the shogun called "Omemie." Even today, this gate is used on certain special occasions such as New Year holidays and grand festivals. A wall stretching to the right and left from this gate surrounds the main shrine. This surrounding wall totals 160 m and is entirely carved. Large-scale repairs were made to the Kara-mon Gate in the Heisei period (1989 ~) and the carved surrounding wall has been completed with its beautiful colors restored.

[Sacred Stable/Three Monkeys] (Important Cultural Property) • • • Photo5

"Sacred horses serving the deity stay in the sacred stable. This is the only natural wooden building among those at the Toshogu Shrine. Its composition follows the style of a stable attached to a mansion of a samurai at that time. The sculpture of the three famous monkeys that "see no evil," "speak no evil" and "hear no evil" are carved in a beam running between the columns. These depict the life of the monkey, preaching the morality one should follow.

[Three Sacred Storehouses/Imaginary Elephants] (Important Cultural Property) • • • Photo6

Behind the front gate, there are three buildings, the upper, middle and lower sacred storehouses. In these storehouses, which form the ancient square log architecture called "Azekura-zukuri," costumes used during the Togyo Festival held in spring and autumn (a parade of 1000 warriors in 100 kinds of armor), as well as arms and horse riding gear for horseback archery called Yabusame, are stored. On the side of the upper sacred storehouse, two "elephants" are carved. These sculptures, which are called "Imaginary Elephants," are said to have been drawn by the imagination of the famous artist, Tanyu Kano.

[Sleeping Cat] (National Treasure) • • • Photo7

This well-known sleeping cat is located at the entrance approaching the Inner Shrine in the east corridor, and is said to be the work of the legendary sculptor, Jingoro Hidari. Another sculpture of sparrows is on the reverse side, and is also said to imply the peace of a cat and sparrows living in harmony.

RINNOJI

Nikko-zan Rinnoji

~ Old Nikko-zan ~ History Shaped the Syncretism of Shinto and Buddhism

Rinnoji Temple began with the Shihonryu-ji Temple built by Holy Priest Shodo, who founded many temples in Nikko. Rinnoji was developed as the core temple at Nikko-zan. When Taiyuin was constructed as the mausoleum for the third shogun, Lord Iemitsu, in 1653, the temple gained profound reverence from the Tokugawa shogunate. Although the Ordinance Distinguishing Shinto and Buddhism issued by the Meiji government caused some confusion, the temple overcame this to exist until the present day.

~ Three Buddha Hall ~

Symbols of the Sacred Nikko Mountains are Enshrined

[Three Buddha Hall](Important Cultural Property) ・・・ Photo1

For syncretism of Buddhism with the mountain religion of three mountains in Nikko (Mt. Nantai, Mt. Nyoho, and Mt. Taro) as objects of worship, Senju-Kannon (Mt. Nantai), Amida Nyorai (Mt. Nyoho), and Bato-Kannon (Mt. Taro) are enshrined as the identity of the gods. It is also said that Jikaku Daishi or Ennin built this hall, imitating the Kompon-chudo Hall of Mt. Hiei.
The hall was originally built near Takinoo Shrine, but the third shogun of the Kamakura shogunate, Lord Minamoto no Sanetomo, relocated the hall to the site of the current Toshogu Shrine. When Toshogu Shrine was founded, it was relocated again to where Futarasan Shrine is now located. The hall was dismantled for reconstruction to the present location under the Ordinance Distinguishing Shinto and Buddhism issued in the Meiji period.
Toward its completion in 2020, the main hall is currently under repair.

[Kaizan-do Hall] (Important Cultural Property)

This is the burial place of Holy Priest Shodo, who founded many temples in Nikko. This entirely Bengal red and vermillion-lacquered structure was built around 1720 in a multi-story square style where a wooden statue of Jizo Bosatsu as the principal image of Buddha, seated statues of Holy Priest Shodo and his ten great disciples are located. A Buddhist memorial service is annually held for the founder in April. Behind the Kaizan-do Hall, Shodo's tomb is located in the five-ring pagoda. In addition, Rinnoji has many other precious structures.

1. Three seated statues of Buddha in Three Buddha Hall (the identity of the three mountain gods): Senju-Kannon (Mt. Nantai), Amida Nyorai (Mt. Nyoho), and Bato-Kannon (Mt. Taro).
2. Main Hall of Taiyuin Mausoleum: The inside of the main hall is full of many gold foil covered sculptures.
3. The partially dismantled repair work is visible from the corridor on the 7th floor of the temporary roof during the work period.
4. Yasha-mon Gate: This orthodox-style gate attracts much attention due to its vivid coloring.
5. Kouka-mon Gate: The entrance to Lord Iemitsu's mausoleum is located in the innermost area of Taiyuin behind the main hall. It is not open to the public.
6. The ceremony of forced rice eating traces back to Shugen-do in the mountains. Annually held on April 2.

~Taiyuin~ Mausoleum for Lord Iemitsu~

Taiyuuin Mausoleum is the burial place of the third shogun of the Tokugawa shogunate, Lord Iemitsu.
The main hall, intermediate room, and worship hall were built in "Gongen-zukuri style" similar to the Toshogu Shrine in 1653. The structure represents early Edo-period architecture and was constructed by the first class technicians. It is now designated as a national treasure. The magnificent architectural decorations, such as sculptures, Japanese lacquer work, paintings and decorative fittings, and a variety of techniques are applied even to areas that are not readily visible. The basic colors of Toshogu Shrine are white and gold, while those of Taiyuuin Mausoleum are gold and black with more reddish gold foil than that used for Toshogu Shrine.

[Main Hall (Photo 2)/ Intermediate Room/Worship Hall] (National Treasure)

The main hall, intermediate room and worship hall are connected buildings with no partitions. Consequently, the main hall is visible from the worship hall.
The worship hall is 64 tatami mats wide, and the 140 dragons on the ceiling were painted by the Kano Clan. The intermediate room connects the worship hall with the main hall. A Chinese phoenix is painted on its coffered ceiling, and the pictures of ascending and descending dragons are displayed on the border with the main hall. And the main hall is full of various sculptures with much gold, and is also called Kinkaku-den Hall.

[Yasha-mon Gate] (Important Cultural Property) ・・・ Photo4

Yasha-mon Gate is an eight-pillared gate with Chinese-style gables on the front and rear eaves of the roof. The gate is carved with peony arabesques for decoration, and is also called the "Peony Gate." In addition, the pillars are vertically grooved at specific intervals. Statues of red and green Yasha are enshrined between the front right and left sides, while white and blue ones are enshrined in the back.

[Koka-mon Gate] (Important Cultural Property) ・・・ Photo5

Koka-mon Gate is located at the entrance of the path leading to the inner hall (burial place of Lord Iemitsu), which is not open to the public. This gate is constructed in the "dragon palace style" of the Ming dynasty in China, and as a result, it is also called the "Ryugu-mon Gate (Dragon Palace Gate)," for an impression that is different from other gates. The outside is richly colored, but the wainscot is painted white using a special technique called Mitsuda-nuri.

Nikko Futarasan Shrine

~ Passed Down to Today ~ The Mysterious Power in Nikko

1. Shinkyo (Sacred Bridge) was repaired in 1636 and beautifully lacquered in vermillion, as it is today.
2. Worship Hall of the Main Shrine. Eleven structures in the Futarasan Shrine, including Shinkyo (Sacred Bridge), are designated as important cultural properties.
3. Yayoi Festival heralds the arrival of spring. This is a photo of a float being paraded. The festival is annually held on April 13-17.
4. Takinoo Shrine has a simple appearance. The Bamboo of Matchmaking is on the right side.

Nikko Futarasan Shrine has been the center worship for the mountain religion in Nikko since ancient times. Particularly since the Middle Ages, many shrine buildings were constructed. In the Edo period, the Tokugawa shogunate constructed a new main shrine and other shrine buildings.

[Shinkyo (Sacred Bridge)] (Important Cultural Property) • • • Photo 1

There is a legend about snakes which turn into this sacred bridge used by Holy Priest Shodo to cross the Daiya River when he founded a temple at Nikko. In 1636, this bridge was beautifully lacquered in vermilion as it is today. During the Edo period, it was repaired or renovated 14 times. After being lost due to a flood in 1902, the bridge was restored to its original state.

[Main Hall] (Important Cultural Property)

The beautiful main shrine has multiple ridges in the Azuchi-Momoyama style, and was constructed as a donation by the second shogun Lord Hidetada in 1619. The shrine has a single-layer Irimoya-zukuri roof with black-lacquered copper sheet roofing. The eaves hang over the front staircase of the building. Although the copper sheets of the roof were replaced or re-lacquered, the main shrine basically remains as originally constructed, showing its original architectural style.

[Associated Shrine: Takinoo Shrine] (Important Cultural Property) • • • Photo 4

Takinoo Shrine is located in the heavily-wooded mountains approximately 1 km northwest of the main shrine of Futarasan Shrine. The main shrine and Kara-mon Gate are designated as important cultural properties. Tagorihime no Mikoto is enshrined as a deity and you can see Mt. Nyoho from the back door of the main shrine. Behind the main shrine, there are three giant cedars and the corner where Tagorihime no Mikoto is said to have descended is surrounded by a stone fence. There are also the "Kodane-ishi Stone," which is said to bestow pregnancy, and the "Bamboo of Matchmaking."

Conservation of World Heritage

Deliver to the future

Handing Down World Heritage, "Shrines and Temples of Nikko," to the Future Generations

1. Repair of the East & West Carvings of the Surrounding Wall and Kara-mon Gate for conservation: Completed (FY 2011)
2. Repair of the Three Buddha Hall for conservation: Construction of a temporary roof, and disassembly of the roof sheathing (FY 2012)
3. Repair of Shinkyo (Sacred Bridge) for conservation: Assembly of wooden parts (FY 2000)

The Constant Challenge of Conserving World Heritage

In order to hand down the precious cultural heritage of Nikko to the coming generations, continued preservation and conservation efforts are indispensable. The shrines and temples of Nikko have been registered as a world heritage site and have been properly managed since their construction in the early Edo period until now. Nikko, which is a cold high land surrounded by mountains, has been repeatedly hit by natural disasters. However, the structures have been restored to their original state each time, based on the remaining documents. In addition, in a rainy and moist climate, repair is made systematically and continually, such as mending roofs and rotten wooden parts, as well as painting. When applying for registration as a world cultural heritage, the importance of conservation activities for the "shrines and temples of Nikko" was given even more attention. Although the buildings have been protected by designating them as national treasures or important cultural properties, sufficient local conservation measures had not been taken in the Sannai area. Therefore, prior to the registration, formulation of domestic laws for the preservation of the recommended zones in the Nikko Sannai area (designation as national historic sites) was needed.

Interested organizations, including two shrines and a temple, jointly worked toward the realization of historic sites designated by the national government, while promoting the formulation of a conservation and management plan. As a result of efforts and the cooperation among all persons involved, 50.8 ha of the Nikko Sannai area has been designated as national historic sites under the Law for the Protection of Cultural Properties.

Toshogu Middle Sacred Storehouse Before conservation repair work

Middle Sacred Storehouse of Toshogu Shrine: The bay structure and painting remaining on the back side of the current logs used for this storehouse are proof of origin in the Edo Period, constructed by Lord Hidetada. These facts were discovered by a survey during repair work.

Regarding registration, the UNESCO World Heritage Committee specially commented that "it is necessary to constantly pay attention to maintain this environment," while focusing on the significance of continued preservation even after registration. Under the formulated "Conservation and Management Plan for the Historic Site of Nikko Sannai," the Sannai area is divided into five zones. The Plan specifies provisions on construction, extension and renovation of structures in each zone, installation and removal of workpieces, changes in landform, cutting down of trees and bamboo, excavation and research, etc. In the event of any change in current conditions, permission from the Agency for Cultural Affairs is required in advance.

Toshogu Middle Sacred Storehouse After conservation repair work (2006)

Conservation Work Flow for the Middle Sacred Storehouse

(1) Recording ▶
The conditions before repair are recorded. The design, pattern, etc. are traced in detail on thin Japanese paper.

(2) Cleaning ▶
Old painting is scraped off and removed.

(3) Sketch Adjustment ▶
Pigments and techniques used for traditional painting are carefully checked, and a sketch is depicted to show how it should be.

(4) Lifting and Foil Pressing ▶
A stereoscopic effect is given by raising the outline of Okiage pattern, and gold foil is pressed there.

(5) Intermediate Coating ▶
Color gradation is achieved by intermediate painting, and the underlying color is applied with mineral pigments (powdered natural ore).

(6) Applying Mineral Pigments ▶
Mineral pigments are repeatedly applied for the finish, and the painting process is finished with gold detailing.

(7) Completion
The gorgeous painting is reproduced with mineral pigments, gold foil, and gold paint in the traditional style.

Selected Nikko Brand "Natural Ice of Nikko"

Natural Ice

Japan has a surprisingly long history for using natural ice, and has been a favorite of people from long ago. The number of natural ice manufacturers in Japan has decreased from several hundred in the Taisho period (1912-1926) to only five today. Nikko City, home of three manufacturers, is the undisputed area for top brand natural ice in Japan. "Natural Ice of Nikko" has been certified as a selected Nikko brand. It is our hope that the value of natural ice produced in the traditional manner will become widely known, and its popularity will continue.

Selected Nikko Brand "Handmade Soba(Buckwheat Noodles) of Nikko"

Soba(Buckwheat Noodles)

"Handmade Soba (Buckwheat Noodles) of Nikko" are produced under excellent natural conditions such as blessed morning and night mists, and clean yet abundant natural water resources. As a result, the soba chefs in Nikko gained the proud reputation that "Soba (Buckwheat Noodles) of Nikko are delicious." Gradually, the sophisticated techniques were handed down as a tradition and Nikko became known as the "Town of Soba (Buckwheat Noodles)." "Homemade Soba (Buckwheat Noodles) of Nikko" has been certified as a selected Nikko brand. This wonderful culture of Soba (Buckwheat Noodles), of which Nikko is proud, is expected to continue to satisfy many gastronomers' palates.

Selected Nikko Brand "Yuba (Bean-Curd Skin) of Nikko"

Yuba (Bean-Curd Skin)

Yuba (bean-curd skin) of Nikko began as a food with excellent preservation and nutrition carried by many ascetics traveling to Nikko (such as high priests including Kobo Daishi or Kukai, Jigen Daishi or Tenkai, itinerant monks called yamabushi, and mountain ascetics), where mountain worship was established by Holy Priest Shodo. "Yuba of Nikko" is expected to become globally recognized for its value and fame as an element of the world heritage site. As a symbol of Nikko' s history and dietary culture, yuba of Nikko has been certified as a selected brand of Nikko.

The Wonderful Food Culture held by the World Heritage Site

Blue-Ribbon Nikko Brand Selection

Selected Nikko Brand "Exquisite and Well-Conserved Water of Nikko"

Exquisite and Well-Conserved Water

There are five headstreams in the City of Nikko: the Ojika, Yunishi, Kinu, Daiya, and Watarase Rivers. The "Water of Nikko" has deeply influenced not only its food culture but every value in Nikko. The water of Nikko is not just excellent drinking water, but it is also a resource for tourism and a resource to support daily life. The water of Nikko, which has been certified as a selected brand of Nikko, is expected to continue to be cherished as exquisite and well-conserved water.

Techniques and Tastes Unique to Nikko.
Enjoy the Exquisite and Carefully Selected Products.

Clean water and a productive land are the natural blessings of Nikko. A variety of foods and a rich dietary culture created under the historical background have been created in Nikko. Unique and top products are selected from the food domain of Nikko, which are collectively called "Selected Nikko Brand Products."

"Selected Nikko Branding" is expected to further enhance the brand image of the entire food domain of Nikko with its value recognized by everyone versed in such brands, further contributing to the improvement of the urban image of Nikko City.

Selected Nikko Brand "Association of Long and Well-Established Stores in Nikko"

Long-Established Stores

Nikko has been visited by persons of high rank and by cultural celebrities throughout the ages. Nikko yuba (bean-curd skin), Nikko yokan (sweet bean jelly), and Nikko togarashi (chili) have been highly prized by many as specialties of Nikko for many years. The "Association of Long and Well-Established Stores in Nikko"" was set up by 17 long and well-established stores, which survived severe competition and strengthened the Nikko brand. This Association has also been certified as a selected Nikko brand as a symbol that will further develop the diverse dietary culture unique to Nikko springing from the world heritage "shrines and temples of Nikko."