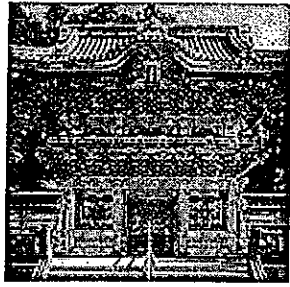


KANUMA YATAI FLOAT CENTER
Kanuma City, Tochigi Prefecture, Japan



HISTORY

Just after the age of civil wars, in the late 17th century, Kanuma became a significant town. When Saint Shodo founded Nikko as a place of Buddhist worship, Kanuma became an important place for followers going to and from Nikko. During the Edo period it developed into a post town along the Reiheishi-kaido (road). When the Nikko-Toshogu Shrine was built, the town enjoyed prosperity as a trading center between Edo (present-day Tokyo) and Nikko.

The Yatai (ornately carved wooden floats), cultural assets unique to Kanuma, were also made during this period. Many of the woodworkers who constructed the famous Toshogu shrine in Nikko (pictured above) were Kanuma citizens. These woodworkers had to be highly skilled craftsmen in order to complete the intricate details of the shrine. More than four million, five hundred thousand craftsmen were involved in the construction of the shrine. After completing Toshogu Shrine in Nikko, many master craftsmen settled in Kanuma. Today's master woodcrafters in Kanuma are actually descendants of those artisans who settled in Kanuma more than 100 years ago.

GREAT FALL FESTIVAL

Kanuma's Great Fall Festival, called Aki-Matsuri or O-Matsuri in Japanese, occurs every year in mid-October. Presently, there are 29 carved (yatai) floats in Kanuma, which are stored or are on display in museums. These floats (representing districts of Kanuma) are pulled into the grounds of Imamiya Shrine on the morning of October 9th, where an opening ceremony is held. After this, the floats are paraded from dawn to dusk, up and down the main streets of Kanuma. Taiko drum groups play music from inside the floats' interior and at road intersections districts compete to see who can play the loudest, thus showing which of Kanuma's districts has the most pride.

YATAI FLOAT CENTER

One of this center's centerpieces of craftsmanship is the huge 16-foot carved column of three mythical creatures; a dragon, a Chinese lion and a phoenix, that is located in its lobby. These three animals have much mysticism associated with them and are common subjects of carvings in shrines and temples throughout Japan.



DRAGONS(Ryuu)

The first images of dragons came to Japan from China in the 8th century. They are described as having the horns of a deer, a head like a camel, eyes of a demon and the body of a snake, that is often poised in a form that represents the Big Dipper constellation. According to legends, they live deep under the water of lakes, seas and oceans. They are the protector of the East and have the power to fly, call the clouds, and cause it to rain. It is said that dragons fly up into the sky on the first day of spring in March and go down into the earth on the first day of autumn in September. This schedule relates to the Big Dipper's movements through the sky.

Dragons have very short legs and clawed fingers with thick padded palms like lions or tigers. The Japanese thought that the number of claws that a dragon had was symbolic of a country's prestige. Chinese dragons were known to have 5 claws, Korean dragons had 4 claws; so the Japanese, feeling a bit inferior, believed that their dragons had to have only three claws.

The ears of a dragon are long but they are said to be completely deaf. In Japanese the Chinese (Kanji) character for the word "deaf" actually is made up of 2 smaller characters meaning "dragon" and "ear". Dragons are often carved with clouds or waves around them because of their life in the sea and the ability to travel between Earth and Heaven.

SACRED CHINESE LIONS (Kara-Jishi)

The Kara-jishi is a sacred animal like the dragon. An old Chinese story tells that the tiger used to be the king of the animals, but when the lion came to China from Europe it became the king of all animals and replaced the tiger, thus they are called Kara-jishi or sacred Chinese lions. They are often portrayed in Japanese paintings and sculptures. Lions, symbols of political strength and military might, were very popular in late 16th century Japanese art. They are carved in great abundance at Nikko's Toshogu Shrine representing Ieyasu Tokugawa's political and military prowess.



Phoenixes(Hou)

In China, the phoenix is known as the king of all winged creatures. It is symbolic of resilience because of its coming back from the fire and ashes to soar once again in great splendor. The presence of the phoenix is associated with peace and prosperity. The Chinese consider the phoenix as being a very lucky omen and to receive this luck it's image is often put in the southern part of a dwelling. Phoenixes have crests on their heads and are usually carved with paulownia tree branches in the background. The image of a phoenix and a dragon represents the balanced forces of Yin & Yang, respectively. This balanced couple of serpent and bird is analogous to the pair of Buddhist deities - Garuda (half bird/human, often stylized in the image of a fire) and the Naga (half serpent/human, referred to as the bearer of rain and controller of weather).