

*"The meaning of my birth into this world
was that it was a source of happiness to everyone"*

Hōshi Soun, Shin Buddhist Priest (1908-1988)



The Woodcarvings of Higashi Honganji

Amida Hall



In the Amida Hall, among the many woodcarvings, there are transoms sparkling with goldleaf with the carvings of various flora and fauna visible between them and along the ceiling inside and outside the Hall. These

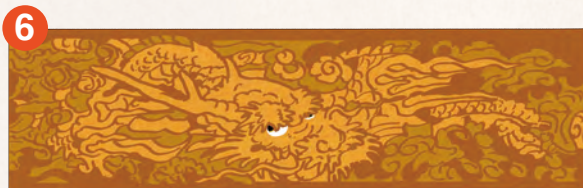
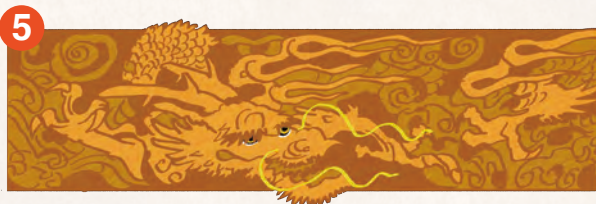
carvings have to be covered by nets to keep the birds away, making them difficult to see, but when the morning sun shines on them, it is a good time to view these subtle woodcarvings in those hard-to-see places ④.

Founder's Hall Gate

Above the doors of the Founder's Hall Gate, there are two dragons. The one on the east ⑤ was carved by the woodcarver from Owari and the one

on the west ⑥ by the woodcarver from Inami. Please note that the two dragon faces are different. The dragons' whiskers also are different. The

one on the east has whiskers carved in wood, and the one on the west has copper ones.



Amida Hall Gate

On the Amida Hall Gate, the dancing Chinese lions, called *shishi* in Japanese, were carved by a craftsman from Kyoto. In the Orient, the dancing lions often represents an imaginary animal. In the Meiji Era (1868–1912), however, as international exchanges became frequent, people had a chance to see actual lions. It is re-

corded that a lion finally arrived at the Kyoto City Zoo in 1906. This was just after the Amida Hall Gate was built. We can well imagine that the Chinese lions carved here were the result of the deep impression that one living example made on the artisan for the first time ⑦.



Higashi Honganji and Inami Woodcarving

There is an intimate relationship between the Inami woodcarving tradition of Toyama Prefecture and Higashi Honganji, beginning as far back as the Edo Period. When the Inami Betuin Zuisenji was destroyed by fire in 1762, woodcarvers attached to Higashi Honganji were dispatched for its reconstruction, and the local Inami carpenters became their apprentices. This was the beginning of the famous woodcarving town of Inami, which also has been selected as a Japan Heritage site.

In 1864, Higashi Honganji burned down during warfare. When reconstruction began from 1879, the Inami woodcarvers rushed to Kyoto and made numerous important contributions to the Halls. Many of their woodcarvings seen today date from that time.

The charming town of Inami is a place, where one can gain deep knowledge of Japanese culture, is a popular destination for tourists from overseas.

The Woodcarvings in the Higashi Honganji Precincts

Splendid woodcarvings can be seen everywhere in Higashi Honganji. Beautiful woodcarvings of a phoenix and a peacock hen greet the eye at the front of the Founder's Hall and the Amida Hall. On the ceiling, the beam construction has a decorative feature called a "toad strut," resembling a toad astride the beam.

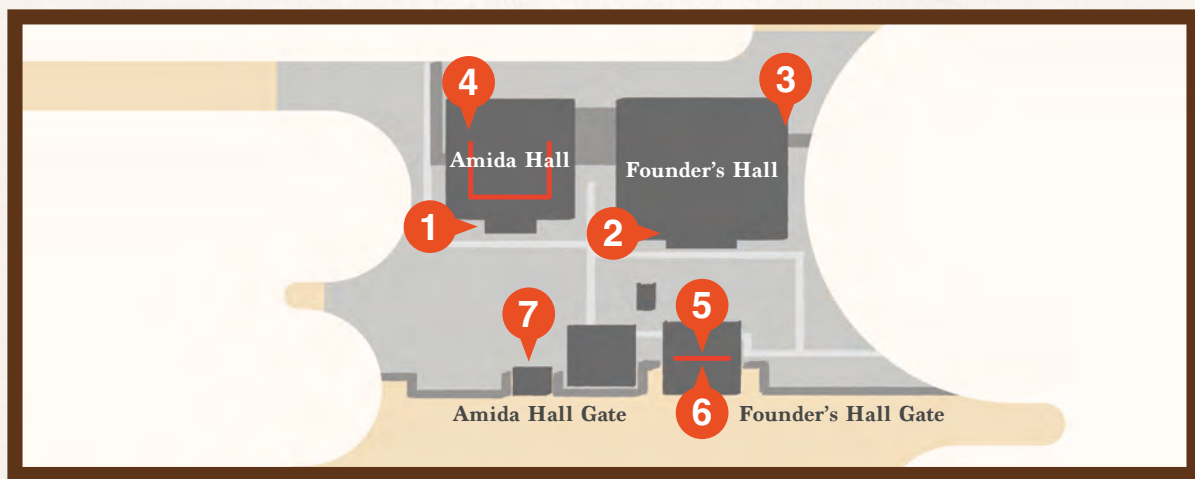
When Higashi Honganji was destroyed by fire in 1864 and rebuilt in 1895,

master woodcarvers from Owari (Aichi Prefecture), Kyoto, Etchū Inami (Toyama Prefecture), and so on, hurried here to share their renowned skills to produce the magnificent woodcarvings seen here.

In the past, woodcarvings were made by carpenters as part of their work, but in the modern era, along with the division of labor in the construction field, skilled craftsmen appeared who spe-

cialized in woodcarving, who greatly developed the techniques.

In the Founder's Hall Gate, the dragon carved by the master craftsman Iwakura Rihachi of Inami, who served as chief woodcarver, glares down fiercely at the precincts on the Founder's Hall side, while the dragon carved by Hayase Chōbei of Owari, positively glowers at the Karasuma Street side.

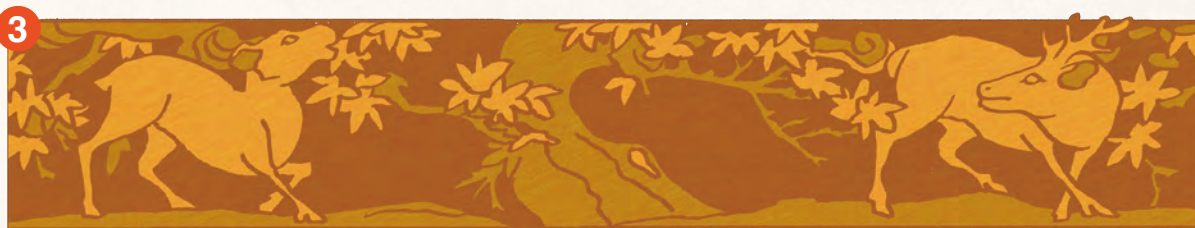


Founder's Hall・Amida Hall

Golden-whiskered dragons appear in both Halls, the Founder's Hall Gate, and the four corners of the bell tower roof. Also note the elephant on the architrave of the Amida Hall ① and the mythical dream-eating *baku* on the Founder's Hall ②.



Founder's Hall



In the Founder's Hall, north side, there is a woodcarving that can be examined very close up: the deer and

maple tree motif on the veranda transom. Carved with an exceptionally high degree of skill, it utilizes the

subtle variations in wood texture to express the coat of the deer, the bark of the tree trunk, etc.③.



Inami, the Japan Heritage woodcarving town!

The Inami Betsuin Zuisenji in the temple town Inami (Nanto City, Toyama Prefecture) was built by Shakunyo Shōnin (1350–1393), the fifth head priest of the Honganji, and his many followers who valued the teachings of Shin Buddhism. The rhythmic tap-tap-tap sounds of woodcarving can be heard in the town, which in fact is a kind of woodcarving museum. The Zuisenji's Taishidō, rebuilt in the Taishō Era (1912–1926), is a treasure house of Inami woodcarving. The skills of the Inami woodcarvers, who vied with

woodcarvers from throughout Japan in the Meiji Era reconstruction of Higashi Honganji, are still alive there. The Teramachi Zakkaten (the temple-town general store), located in front of the Zuisenji, is operated by local people for whom the temple is very important. They endeavor to unite the temple and the region, and the souvenirs that they have on sale tell a story of their own.



Taishi Den-E

The Taishi Den-E is a traditional performance held at the Inami Betsuin Zuisenji, said to have started around 1710. Narrations based on biographical scrolls depicting the life of Shotoku Taishi (Prince Shotoku, 574-622) are presented, and the statue of the two-year-old Shotoku Taishi is put on display. During this period, special exhibitions at the Treasure Hall, tea ceremonies, flower arrangement exhibitions, etc. are held. Also, the "Inami Taishi Den Tourism Festival" takes place (Friday – Sunday) during the period of the Taishi Den-E. A variety of events are held at the Betsuin and in the town.

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