

The ancient landscapes and buildings of Hiraizumi

Hiraizumi in Iwate Prefecture is a small, quiet town of around 8,300 people today, but in its heyday it rivalled Kyoto. In the 11th and 12th centuries (the late Heian period), it was an important centre of power—political, economic and cultural. It was from here that the Oshu Fujiwara clan, a branch of the highly influential Fujiwara family, ruled over Tohoku, the northern part of Japan's main island of Honshu. In 2011, a group of ancient Buddhist temples, landscapes and archaeological remains in Hiraizumi was designated as a UNESCO World Heritage cultural property.

The World Heritage site includes temples, gardens and archaeological sites recognized for their universal value expressing Pure Land Buddhism. Among the temples is Chusonji [image a] which is famous in Japan for its Golden Hall, known as the Konjikido. Motsuji Temple is also part of the designated site; each year the ritual Ennen-no-Mai or Longevity Dance [b] is performed here. Combining drama, dance and song, these performances are considered the antecedent of Noh theatre.

A family tale

Built by three generations of the Oshu Fujiwara clan, the historic sites of Hiraizumi tell the story of a family—its rise to power, a tragedy and its fall.

It was Fujiwara no Kiyohara, founder of the Oshu Fujiwara clan, who moved his headquarters to Hiraizumi which was central and had a flatter topography making it a good location from which to oversee the Tohoku area. He built a pagoda and then further buildings at Chusonji temple (said to have been established in 850CE), making the temple into a great monastery.

The motivation for building lay in personal tragedy. In his struggle for control of the family, Kiyohara lost his wife and children, who were killed at the hands of his own half brother. The senselessness of this loss and the knowledge that people were tired of war and its hardships led to him creating Hiraizumi as a Buddhist capital to bring peace and stability.

Konjikido

Chusonji is most famous for the Konjikido golden hall which was completed in 1124. The Konjikido is completely covered in gold. The Oshu area was very wealthy from trade and precious resources, one of which was gold, only found locally. Unlike the famous



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Golden Pavilion in Kyoto which is exposed to the elements, the Konjikido was soon covered by another structure to protect it. A mere two years after the golden hall's completion, Kiyohara died and he is enshrined in the central altar of the Konjikido.

Next generations—Motsuji

Kiyohara's son Motohira continued his father's efforts, and built the Motsu-ji temple complex (origins 850CE) which is also part of the World Heritage listing. The work was completed by his son, Hidehara. The original buildings were burnt down after the fall of the Oshu Fujiwara clan, but the faithfully restored Pure Land Garden and the temple remains are protected. In May, Gokusui no En [c] takes place, a poetry-writing event in which participants compose poetry before a floating cup of sake reaches them. Motohira's wife commissioned another temple Kanjizaio-in; what remains is the beautiful garden [d] which connects with the surrounding landscape.

Literary landscape

Gazing upon Hiraizumi inspired the poet Matsuo Basho (1644-1694) to write his famous haiku:

夏草や 兵どもが 夢の跡

Natsu-kusa ya | tsuwamono
domo ga | yume no ato

Summer grasses ...

the remains of warriors' dreams

Hiraizumi Tourism Association

<http://hiraizumi.or.jp/en/index.html> - this well illustrated site has excellent practical information and explanations of the history of the various sites that make up the World Heritage listing.

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