Portraits in the Yoma

Shotoku Taishi (572–622) was an Imperial prince and an ardent Buddhist. He was a strong force behind the acceptance and spread of Buddhism throughout Japan.

The Seven Masters of Jodo Shinshu are Buddhist teachers whom Shinran Shonin revered for their clarifying insight into the meaning of the Pure Land Buddhist teaching. From India: Nagarjuna (c. 150–250) and Vasubandhu (c. 320–400); from China: T’an-luan (Donran in Japanese; 476–542), Tao-ch’o (Doshaku in Japanese; 562–654), and Shan-tao (Zendo in Japanese; 613–681); and from Japan: Genshin (942–1017), and Honen (Genku, 1133–1212).

Some temples display portraits of Shinran Shonin’s wife, Eshinni (1182–1268), whose letters recorded important historical events, and Kukushin (1224–1283), their youngest daughter who helped to preserve Shinran Shonin’s legacy.

Large Incense Burner (Koro)

A large incense burner called the Koro rests on a lacquered wooden stand in the front and center of the Gejin. There are usually two dragons, placed like handles, on the sides of the Koro. The dragon on the left has its mouth closed, signifying death, and the dragon on the right has its mouth open, signifying birth. Thus, we are encouraged to be mindful of birth and death as we approach the Buddha and the Dharma.

REFERENCES:

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Have you ever entered a Buddhist temple and been amazed by the complexity of the altar? Have you ever wondered about the objects and what their purpose and symbolic meaning were?

This pamphlet describes traditions of the Jodo Shinshu Hongwanji-Ha, a school of Pure Land Buddhism founded in Japan. The Buddhist Churches of America, which began as a missionary program of the Jodo Shinshu Hongwanji-Ha, follows these traditions.

The Jodo Shinshu Naijin Shrine

In Jodo Shinshu Buddhist temples, the main hall, or Hondo, is divided into two areas: the Naijin and the Gejin. The Naijin is the (inner) altar area, and the Gejin is the (outer) seating area. Most Buddhist ceremonies and rituals take place in or in front of the Naijin. The Naijin is where objects of reverence are placed and where Buddhist priests officiate during services. You may see the word spelled “Onaijin.” The letter “o-” placed before the word Naijin (or “go-” placed before other words) is an honorific form showing respect for what the word represents.

There are many sacred objects in the Naijin. Each object and image has specific purpose and meaning. There are often symbolic ties to the time of the historical Buddha, or to ancient cultures of India, China, or Japan.

Central Figure (Gohonzon)

The Jodo Shinshu shrine is dedicated to Amida Buddha, the Buddha of Infinite Wisdom and Unbounded Compassion. An image of the Amida Buddha is housed in the central shrine in the form of either a statue or a picture scroll. Alternatively, a Myogo scroll with the Chinese characters Na Mo A Mi Da Butsu may be enshrined.

The golden statue depicts a standing figure of the Amida Buddha, whose right hand is held up, with the palm facing forward and the thumb and forefinger forming a circle. The left arm hangs downward, with the palm facing forward and the thumb and forefinger forming a circle.

The picture scroll shows an image of the Amida Buddha on a background of forty-eight radiating lines. These symbolize the Forty-eight Vows pledged by the bodhisattva Dharmakara, who later became Amida Buddha.

The Myogo scroll of Chinese characters, which is read Na Mo A Mi Da Butsu, represents the Name of the Amida Buddha.

Shrine Building (Kuden)

The Gohonzon traditionally stands within a highly ornate structure called the Kuden. The architecture resembles a Japanese palace. Pillars and roof beams are painted gold to signify purity, virtue and merit. Figures of dragons, peacocks, elephants, and lions adorn it, expressing the Buddha’s spiritual power, truth, and majesty.

Hanging from the corners of the roof are necklace-like ornaments called Ssuim Yoraku. They represent the attainment of nobility through noble deeds.

Lamps are part of the Central Shrine. Two hexagonal lanterns called Tsuri Toro hang in front of the Kuden. They represent lanterns made by Shakyamuni Buddha for his disciples so that, when traveling at night, they could avoid killing insects and small creatures on the road. A pair of Kiku Rinto, circular lamps decorated with a chrysanthemum flower pattern, represent Enlightenment without beginning or end.

Throne (Shumidan)

The Kuden rests upon a rectangular dais or throne called the Shumidan. The Shumidan is wide on the top and bottom and narrow in the middle. It represents the cosmic mountain called Sumeru in Sanskrit.

The Shumidan is made of red and black lacquered wood and is decorated with floral, wave, and animal designs.

In front of the Gohonzon is a small table called the Uwajoku. Four items are placed on this table: two water vessels, one incense burner, and one candle stand. The water vessels often hold greens, without flowers. The candle, usually red, is placed before the Gohonzon. A red lacquered wooden candle may be used as a substitute for a lit candle during ceremonies. There may also be a stand used as the base for the Buttanoki, a container which holds an offering of cooked rice.

Front Table (Maejoku)

In front of the Shumidan is a larger table called the Maejoku. It is ornately carved and decorated with animals and flower patterns.

Brocade cloths are used to cover the tables in the Naijin. There are two cloths for the Maejoku. First, a Mizubiki is wrapped around the front and sides. Second, a triangular-shaped cloth called an Ushidiki is draped over the front.

Arrangements of candles, incense, and flowers are placed on the Maejoku. A central incense burner with candle stand on the right and flower vase on the left is called Mitsugusoku. An incense burner with a candle stand on each side and a flower vase on the outside of each candle stand is called Gogusoku.

Candlelight represents the Wisdom of the Buddha, which illuminates the ignorance of human beings. Flowers signify impermanence; they are a reminder of the fleeting existence of human life. Incense is traditionally associated with purification, and it enhances religious feelings. Offering flowers and incense are traditional ways of praising the Buddha.

Portraits in the Onaijin

On the right side of the wall behind the Kuden is a portrait scroll of Shinran Shonin (1173-1263), the founder of Jodo Shinshu. A portrait scroll of Rennyo Shonin (1414-1499), the eighth mokushi or abbot, hangs on the left wall. These two portraits mark the boundaries of the Naijin. Some temples have additional space to the right and left of the central altar. This area is called the Yoma. Usually a picture or statue of Shotoku Taishi is enshrined on the right side of the Yoma and a picture of the Seven Masters is on the left.