

A Piece of Japanese Baroque

By Nobuo Tsuji

In the previous article in this series, I spoke of the aesthetic of elimination in reference to the famous Ryoanji rock garden. The aesthetic of elimination is, I believe, an apt description of the simplicity and purity of much of traditional Japanese art. There is, however, another, more elaborate aspect of traditional Japanese art, perhaps best represented by Nikko's Toshogu Shrine.

Located roughly 140 kilometers northwest of Tokyo, Nikko national park is a beautiful place famous for elegant extinct volcanoes, lovely Lake Chuzenji and the dramatic Kegon Falls. Ancient Japanese beliefs taught that spirits resided in the mountains, and since the 8th century, Nikko has been an especially holy place for a kind of mountain Esoteric Buddhism known as *shugendo*. It is not surprising that the second Tokugawa shogun Hidetada should choose Nikko as the final resting place for the remains of his father, Ieyasu (1543–1616), founder of the long-lived Tokugawa shogunate.

Originally a simple affair, Ieyasu's mausoleum did not assume its present form until 1634 when his grandson, the third shogun Iemitsu (1604–1651) commissioned the country's best craftsmen to rebuild the Toshogu Shrine. The project took more than 4.5 million man-days and two years to complete and cost a grand sum of 560,000 *ryo* (one *ryo* equaled 15 grams of gold).

Toshogu Shrine complex appears suddenly in the midst of deep woods; an unexpected and brightly colored apparition. The highlights of the shrine are the Yomeimon gateway, the main hall and the outdoor walkway that surrounds the main hall. Everywhere are elaborate carvings of real and imaginary birds, flowers, animals, figures from Chinese history and myth, and abstract geometric motifs. No surface is free of decoration. Openwork, reliefs and full sculptures are colored in white, black, gold, blue, green and red, and embellished with gold plate and *cloisonné* metalwork.



The Yomeimon gateway of Toshogu Shrine in Nikko, Tochigi Pref.

Photo: Masao Hayashi

So elaborate is the ornamentation that it is hard to discern major structural features, a distinguishing characteristic that sets Toshogu apart from more traditional Japanese architecture in which pillars and beams are openly integrated into a building's composition. While it is possible to suppose that Toshogu's designers were influenced by Ming ornamental styles, the dizzy kaleidoscope of their work is more commonly compared to Western baroque architecture.

It is no accident that, though officially a Shinto shrine, Toshogu more closely resembles a Buddhist temple in its elaborateness. It was, after all, built on the *honji-suijaku* theory—which became popular after the 10th century—that Shinto gods were incarnations of Buddhist deities.

Throughout its more than 200-year history, the Tokugawa shogunate never

failed to keep the Toshogu Shrine in good repair and it quickly became a major object of pilgrimage among nobility and commoners alike. In modern times, Toshogu Shrine and the rest of Nikko have become one of Japan's leading tourist attractions for both Japanese and foreign visitors.

There is a well-known Japanese axiom roughly equivalent to "You haven't seen anything until you see Nikko." I am sure you will agree with that sentiment, no matter how much of Japan you have already seen, once you set eyes on this sacred and yet very human edifice, a monument to the ultimate in imaginative creativity and skill.

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Photo: Kazuhito Fujii

Carvings on the Yomeimon gateway