

# Elaborate Elegance

By Nobuo Tsuji



Photo: Bon Color Photo Agency Co., Ltd.

The funa-boko boat float at the July 17 parade of the Gion Festival in Kyoto.



*Rakuchu-rakugai zu* (detail) by Kano Eitoku, mid-16th century, owned by the Uesugi family.

In the early days of July, when the rainy season gives way to the heat of summer, the streets of Kyoto ring with the high-pitched “cling-clang” of the *sho*, a small metal gong. Fondly referred to by Kyoto natives as the *kon-chicki-chin*, the sound of the *sho* heralds the beginning of the Gion Festival.

The origins of the festival go back more than a thousand years to the year 894, when a terrible epidemic swept through

Kyoto. Believing the plague to be a curse inflicted by Gozu Tenno—the Japanese name for Gavagriva, an Indian god of good health—the people of Kyoto enshrined the god at Yasaka Shrine and every year thereafter commemorated the event with festivities that became increasingly elaborate as time went by.

The Gion Festival lasts from July 1 through July 24. The July 17 parade of festival floats, known as *yamaboko*, is the

festival highlight. On this day, 31 richly decorated floats called *yama* or *hoko*, each belonging to a different neighborhood, wend their way along Kyoto's main avenues. Their great wheels as high as an average adult, the floats are lavishly decorated constructions representing the *furyu* or artistic sentiment of each neighborhood.

The parade is always headed by the *naginata-boko*, which carries atop its roof a tall spearlike pole modeling a *naginata* (a weapon with curved blade and long shaft) to cut away pestilence. The top of the pole reaches a soaring 22 meters above ground. Riding the float is a parish child or *chigo*, accompanied by two attendants, who represents the gods throughout the festival's duration.

The photograph shows the *funa-boko* or boat float characterized by an imaginary golden bird on its prow and a gorgeous house aboard it. The other floats are similarly decorated with strange and wonderful objects such as a great praying mantis and lively puppets representing famous figures out of Chinese and Japanese folklore. The ornate and unique decoration is intended to entertain the gods as well as the festival participants.

The festival painting illustrated here is part of a folding screen painted by the famous 16th-century artist Kano Eitoku (1543–90). Part of a six-fold screen entitled *Rakuchu-rakugai zu* (Scenes in and around Kyoto), the portion shown here gives a bird's-eye view of the Gion Festival in Eitoku's day. The size and decoration of the floats remain much the same today, products of a centuries-old tradition of elegant refinement and artistic achievement. Here, too, is evident the rich diversity that characterizes so much of Japanese art and aesthetic sensibility.

The Gion Festival is the prototype of just about all of Japan's contemporary festivals, and since the 17th century it has been mimicked in many parts of the country, each region adding new variations to the same general theme. ■

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