

Within the Great Hall

Photo and essay by Michael E. Stanley





I walk into the spacious enclosed sanctuary grounds. It is still early, so only a few sightseers are in evidence; they shrink to miniature antlike caricatures in front of the temple's overwhelming facade. Gleaming golden horn-shaped finials crown the huge tiled roof. A flock of crows settles on some of the small trees and tiled eaves. They amuse themselves with strange patterns of long-distance caws. For a moment, the birds' brash obsidian stares instigate a little guilt about not bringing them some breakfast. I ignore them, and after a short time, they find something else to hold their attention. I return my thoughts to this place and the building before me.

The *Daibutsuden* (literally, "Great Buddha Hall") of Nara's Todaiji is the largest single wooden structure in the world. On its completion in the 8th century it was even larger, but the innate infirmities of wood have taken their toll over time. This great hall was once half again as wide as the building before me now, and enclosed more than twice the current area under its roof. Two huge 100-meter seven-story pagodas once flanked the compound, but these have long since disappeared. But what has been maintained is yet magnificent.

Inside the *Daibutsuden* sits an immense bronze image of Roshana, the Buddhist avatar of light. In 735, a wave of smallpox had swept through Japan; Emperor Shomu dedicated this image and the temple complex that houses it as an invocation and protection against another such epidemic. However, only a century had passed since the violent clash between native Shinto and imported Buddhism, so just to be on the safe side, the imperial court decided that the Shinto sun goddess Amaterasu Omikami, legendary ancestor of the imperial line, should be consulted in her sacred precincts of Ise about this great project. The answer was soon forthcoming: Emperor Shomu was visited with a dream in which the sun goddess proclaimed to him that she and Roshana were one: both were manifestations of the sun and its light.

This union of the two beliefs was to be a special part of Japanese religious thinking for more than a millennium.

Japan in those years was in close contact with China and Korea; ideas and innovation flooded into the country. It was not a dim and distant archipelago, but an organic part of East Asia of the time. Nara's great bronze image is a symbol of that era: this was the first attempt at large-scale metal casting in Japan, and it was Korean artisans who provided the expertise in state-of-the-art technology. After the 15-meter, 500,000-kilogram image had been cast in parts, assembled, and gilded, an "eye-opening" ceremony was held and the eyes were painted in by a Buddhist bishop who had traveled from India to Nara for that express purpose.

The centuries have not been too kind to Roshana. The image has seen major repairs; the head has fallen off and been replaced three times. The gilding is now gone and the eyes are unpainted. Perhaps the only sections that remain from the original are parts of the legs and some of the lotus petals that make up its pedestal. The hall has been rebuilt and repaired—and grown smaller in the process. But the fact that such a symbol of its age has survived at all is a wonder.

Later in the day, I return to the *Daibutsuden*. It faces to the west—the direction of the Buddhist Paradise—and the champagne-tinted afternoon light softly fills the huge hall. As the sun dips lower, lights wink on and bathe Roshana and the flanking images in a warm glow. The last visitors straggle toward the gateway as some of the Todaiji's priests begin to close the hall's tall wooden doors. Crows settle in the trees, conversing in raucous tones that fade to silence as night covers all. ■

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