

Izumo-Illuminating Mysteries

Story and photo by Bill Tingey

Stone lanterns are an important feature of so many traditional gardens in Japan. Their presence and design adds much to the overall character of a garden and as an eye-stop they become a pivot around which a scene evolves. But they are not simply decorative. Functionally they serve to illuminate, casting flickering candle-light over a path or act as a kind of beacon leading us on in the gloom.

Lanterns proper were introduced to Japan along with Buddhism in the 8th century. They provided shelter from the wind and made it possible to keep a light burning at temples, while also serving to emphasize the presence of that light. Much later on the grounds of Shinto shrines were graced with lanterns, and then with the disciplined drinking of tea during the two-hundred year period prior to the seventeenth century, they were introduced into tea gardens. Gradually more use was made of stone lanterns and they became an indispensable detail within the Japanese garden.

Stylistically the variations are almost endless. Short, squat, hexagonal types with a wide spreading roof are garden accents that look particularly good after a fall of snow. Another has a bell-shaped top giving the whole lantern the appearance of a heron standing on one leg in the rain, which helps to foster the growth of moss that so often clings to these stone edifices of light. There are sophisticated pagoda-type lanterns in miniature and rustic looking ones resembling a traditional farmhouse. Some are roughly hewn boulders, while others are very decoratively carved. But many of the best came from the west of Japan near Izumo, on the Japan Sea. Using an easily worked local sandstone, lanterns have been made for centuries in this area, which is well known for its myths and legends that reach right back to when the nation was in its infancy.

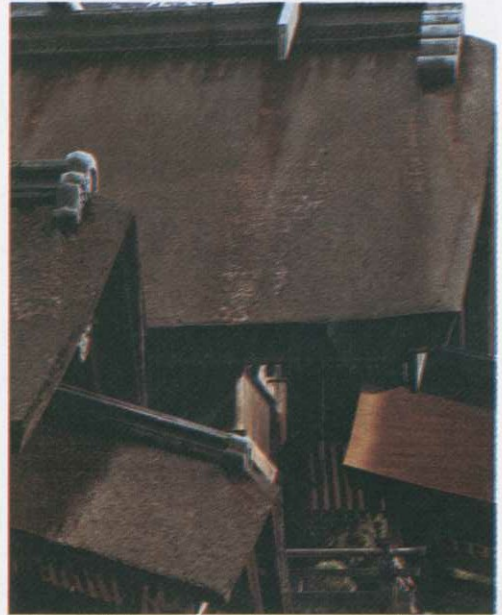
One of the mysteries of this period is Izumo shrine. In the eighth-century *Chronicles of Japan* or *Nihon-Shoki*, records refer to its building saying that "the pillars

of the shrine should be tall and great", and by all accounts they were.

From details in a 10th century document, theoretical reconstructions indicate that it was about 48 meters in height and stood on nine massive columns, perhaps 3 meters in diameter. To create such columns it may well have been necessary to bind together three trees shaped to fit closely against each other. To reach the building there was probably a massive flight of steps that must have seemed like a stairway to the heavens.

Excavations have confirmed its probable existence and it would most certainly have been the largest building of its time, even larger than the Great Buddha Hall of Todaiji temple, itself now the world's largest wooden building.

The colossal size of Izumo shrine was, however, quite literally its downfall. The building toppled several times in the eleventh and twelfth centuries and then, when it was reconstructed in 1248, it was reduced in size. Although more modestly dimensioned than its legendary ancestor, the present building dates from 1744. The tent-like roofs of the main and attendant buildings give it an imposing presence and serenity that any denomination of worshiper is bound to sense.



Izumo Taisha - an imposing presence and serenity

Legend and size apart, the fact that the main building is now square with an asymmetrical floor plan considerably raises its importance in the architectural history of Japan. It also means that the object of worship is enshrined facing the left wall and is not visible from the entrance, which itself is off-center. Conjecture and theory can only provide hints as to exactly why it and its ancient precedent were constructed in this way. And no lantern may ever be able to throw light on such enduring mysteries.



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Reach Izumo by train along the Sanin mainline, or fly to Yonago airport and take the train.

Contact the Matsue Stone Lantern Association for Izumo lanterns (Tel:0852-24-1815). Alternatively go to the Japan Traditional Craft Center, Minami Aoyama, Tokyo (Tel:03-3403-2460).

