

# Nara-History in Scale

Story and photo by Bill Tingey

Despite being a modern city, Nara somehow manages to retain a calm, peaceful atmosphere that may have something to do with its long history. Located due east of present-day Osaka and occupying the north-east corner of the Nara Basin, Heijo-kyo, as Nara was known, was established in 710 as Japan's first permanent capital. It remained so until 794, when government functions were moved to Heian-kyo that later became Kyoto.

But perhaps what contributes more to the ambiance of this ancient city is the way that the buildings give way to the extensive area of Nara Park. Many deer wander here among huge cedars and oaks, browsing off the grass and complete a scene of majestic tranquility.

In the north is Todaiji temple. Approached along a stone-paved path amid trees, the scale and symmetry of this temple as a whole would normally be overpowering and solemn in the extreme. But instead there is a serenity, to which even the Great South Gate contributes. Beyond it, however, we soon become aware of something of enormous scale.

The central gate of the main enclosure affords us our first close-up glimpse of the Great Buddha Hall, almost as if we are seeing it through a microscope. The present building dates from 1709 and rises to a height of 48.7 m, making it as high as the original structure built in the 8th century. The depth, too, at 50.5 m is the same. The frontage, on the other hand, is greatly reduced from some 90 m in width to the present 57 m. Even so, it is still the world's largest wooden building and serves to shelter a statue of the Buddha dominating a shadowy interior, which is characterized by a forest of columns soaring upward to support the imposing tiled roof.

Cast in sections, the Buddha weighing 452 tons was first completed in 749 but an earthquake toppled the head in 855. The head and right hand were melted by a fire which ravaged the building in 1180, and the head was lost once again in the fire of 1567. The overall height

of the statue is 15.8 m making it a little higher than the Buddha at Kamakura near Tokyo.

The casting of the statue and the building of the temple took nine years and involved some 2.6 million people who mostly came from the surrounding area.

Quite near Todaiji is the Shosoin Repository. Built more than a thousand years ago, it holds many of the treasures which were used when the Great Buddha was dedicated. These finely crafted objects come from various parts of the Asian continent, India, the Middle East and even Europe, and are proof of Japan's ancient contacts with distant lands and peoples.

It was the introduction of Buddhism from the Continent during the 6th and 7th centuries that led to the building of Todaiji and it gradually came to influence most aspects of life and culture in Japan.

Early on, the reproduction of Buddhist holy scriptures at Todaiji and at other temples in the city created a demand for writing brushes and ink, and even today some of the best in the country are still made in Nara.

The ink is made by burning pine logs and collecting the soot, which is kneaded into a paste with animal glue and a scent such as musk, before being pressed into molds and subsequently dried into hard blocks.

The hair of horses, Japanese racoons, lambs and even cats is used for the brushes. Having



Part of Todaiji's Great Buddha Hall, seen as if through a microscope

boiled the selected hair, it is cut and bound before being introduced into a bamboo or wooden shaft. It makes a simple writing tool which along with the ink has become as much a part of Nara's history as Todaiji undoubtedly will always be.



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Nara can be most easily reached by train from Kyoto or Osaka. Todaiji is in the northern part of Nara Park, east of the city center. Nara writing brushes and ink are available at specialist stores, some art suppliers, and at the Japan Traditional Craft Center, Minami Aoyama, Tokyo Tel:03-3403-2460.

