



It is astonishing to find that in a nation where culture is so publicly revered, an ancient tradition could persist seemingly in isolation, in a world hidden from view. Such is the case with a devout group of Buddhist nuns who for more than a millennium have endowed and maintained a suite of imperial temple-convents in Kyoto and Nara. Built between the seventh and nineteenth centuries, these buildings were virtual jewelboxes filled with extraordinary works of art and literature. When young women—the daughters of Japan’s highest ranking nobility—took the tonsure and established these institutions, they brought with them, as if a dowry to a marriage, superb furnishings and garments, libraries of books, secular and religious scrolls, paintings, screens, lacquerware, utensils for the spiritual disciplines of tea and flower arrangement, and multitudinous other works of art. The vast wealth of the convents was such that they became known as *bikuni gosho*, or “nuns’ palaces.” While being places of spiritual discipline, the convents also functioned as small courts where the language of imperial circles was maintained and the cultural traditions of court women—the arts of poetry, music, calligraphy, and painting—were cultivated and practiced in their purest form.

During the early nineteenth century, when the convent system reached its apogee

# A Place of their Own

**PIETY AND PATRONAGE IN JAPAN’S IMPERIAL BUDDHIST CONVENTS**



by BARBARA RUCH

under the patronage of the Tokugawa Shogunate, more than 100 convents dotted the Japanese landscape. Nearly all of the convents were disbanded in 1868, when Buddhism was abandoned by the imperial court in favor of pure Shintoism, key tenets of which are a devotion to nature and a belief in the divine origins of Japan and the Japanese people. As imperial support of the convents declined following the decree, princesses who would serve as abbesses and the pool of educated aristocratic women who would have become nuns dwindled, and the buildings fell into a slow decline.

Today, only thirteen imperial temple-convents (*monzeki amadera*) survive, each tended by only one or two nuns. Collectively, they provide a rare glimpse into the history of Buddhist nuns in Japan and the important—and often overlooked—role of these women as both patrons of the arts and as chaste keepers of the faith. Yet until recently, details about their lives and the institutions they founded remained virtually unknown, even within Japan.



AN ALTAR IN THE MAIN RECEPTION HALL  
THE EDO PERIOD (1603–1868) CONVENT OF  
HÓ KYÓJI, WHICH TRACES ITS ORIGINS BACK  
TO THE THIRTEENTH CENTURY.



Realizing the research potential of the surviving convents, the Institute for Medieval Japanese Studies at Columbia University joined forces with the National Institute of Japanese Literature in Tokyo in 1993 to undertake a multidisciplinary survey of the buildings and their contents. With the kind permission of the few remaining abbesses—most of whom were wary of scholars—the assessment was carried out. As suspected, the buildings were indeed treasure troves; they were also in desperate need of conservation. With the patronage of Her Majesty Empress Michiko, and funding from artist Ikuo Hirayama and his Foundation for Cultural Heritage, the institutions brought together specialists from around the globe and embarked on the development of a conservation strategy for the convents.

**AN AERIAL VIEW OF A SNOW-COVERED HŌKYŌJI CONVENT  
IN WEST-CENTRAL KYOTO, ONE OF THE MOST IMPORTANT  
OF THE 13 SURVIVING EDO-PERIOD CONVENTS.**

Among the most significant of the surviving imperial convents is that of Hōkyōji (Temple of the Treasured Mirror), the origins of which can be traced back to the thirteenth-century Abbess Mugai Nyodai (1226–1298), Japan's first female Zen master. Located in west-central Kyoto, the





THIS PAST SUMMER, THE CHOKUSAKU-DŌ, OR IMPERIAL CHAPEL, HŌKYŌJI, FAR LEFT, WAS THE SUBJECT OF A MAJOR CONSERVATION INITIATIVE. TWO PAINTED, GOLD LEAF PANELS BEARING IMAGES OF CRANES ARE SHOWN BEFORE AND AFTER RESTORATION. BELOW, THE LATE ABBESS SAWADA ESAI PRESIDES OVER AN ANNUAL BLESSING OF DOLLS AT THE CONVENT, HELD EACH OCTOBER.

convent we see today, however, was substantially rebuilt following a devastating fire that swept through Kyoto in 1788. Despite the destruction, many of the convent's precious documents and artifacts were preserved, among them an extraordinary near-lifesize, wooden statue of the Abbess Mugai Nyodai, carved during her lifetime.

Hōkyōji is composed of seven principal buildings arranged around a series of courtyard gardens. Among its most impressive structures is the *Chokusaku-dō*, or imperial chapel, once part of Kyoto's Imperial Palace complex, that was dismantled and donated to the convent on the orders of the Emperor Ninkō in 1846. The emperor's sister, Princess Kin no Miya, had taken the tonsure at Hōkyōji. The chapel, which houses an eighteenth-century image of Amida, the Buddha of Everlasting Light, commissioned by her father, Emperor Kōkaku (1774–1840), became her private place of worship. A suite of wall panels bearing images of cranes and pine trees executed in paint and gold leaf form the chapel.

Over the past century and a half since the dissolution of the convents, all of the surviving buildings and their interiors have suffered due to lack of financial support, particularly the *Chokusaku-dō* at Hōkyōji. Delicate construction combined with insect damage and an overall lack of maintenance over the years had resulted in dramatic paint loss and decay of the chapel's structural fabric.

In 2002, the *Chokusaku-dō* was chosen to be the subject of a pilot restoration project undertaken by the Institute for Medieval Japanese Studies in partnership with the World Monuments Fund, and underwritten by the Freeman Foundation. In June 2003, the chapel was deconsecrated, carefully disassembled, and transported to Oka Bokkōdō Studio, Ltd. in Kyoto, one of Japan's premier conservation laboratories. Over the course of four months, the painted panels were cleaned, stabilized, and conserved. Underlying backing papers were repaired and replaced where necessary, while architectural components such as sliding doors and wall panels were restored. Where damage to the building itself was extensive, measures were taken to repair and strengthen the structure.

In September, conservation work on the chapel was completed. The *Chokusaku-dō* was taken back to Hōkyōji where it was reassembled, and— following a reconsecration ceremony—resumed its role in the spiritual life of the convent.

For both the abbesses and conservators, the restoration of the imperial chapel marks a new beginning. While the Robert W. Wilson Challenge is helping to fund additional work at Hōkyōji, it is hoped that in the coming decade, all of the remaining convents will receive the attention they so desperately need. They are indeed critical to our understanding of Buddhism in Japan, and one of the most extraordinary institutions in Japanese history.

Today, the women who now remain spiritually devoted to life in the imperial convents are guardians not only of their faith, but of the great treasures and traditions left to them by royal women of the past. ■

