Nijo-jo Castle Painting Gallery Winter Exhibition in 2026, Series: 400 Years Since the Kan'ei Imperial Visit

A Magnificent Banquet Setting

Ichi-no-ma and Ni-no-ma (First and Second Rooms) of the Kuroshoin

The Kan'ei Imperial Visit, during which Emperor Gomizunoo (1596–1680) visited Nijo-jo Castle for five days starting on September 6, 1626 at the invitation of the Tokugawa shogunate, marked the castle's most splendid period. This year, to commemorate the 400th anniversary of this event, we are exhibiting the murals from the rooms of Ninomaru-goten Palace that were used during the visit. While the main events of the visit centered on Gyoko-goten Palace, located on the south side of the Ninomaru Garden, Ninomaru-goten Palace itself served as a venue for entertaining court nobles and temple heads of aristocratic or imperial lineage who attended the occasion, as well as a viewing area for Noh performances held on the stage located south of the Ohiroma.

This exhibition features murals from the Kuroshoin, which was a space used for entertaining court nobles, specifically showcasing works from part of the First Room and from the Second Room.

The Hierarchy of "Place" Indicated by Subject Matter and Technique

In preparation for the imperial visit, the shogunate undertook a major renovation of Nijo-jo Castle. During this process, a new Honmaru-goten Palace was constructed for the retired shogun Tokugawa Hidetada (1579–1632), along with Gyoko-goten Palace as dedicated palace for the emperor's stay. Existing palace structures were also renovated to serve as Ninomaru-goten Palace for the reigning shogun, Tokugawa Iemitsu (1604–51). The murals within these palaces were executed by artists of the Kano school, led by Kano Tan'yu (1602–74). In the 1678 treatise on Japanese painting, *Honcho Gashi*, compiled by Kano Eino (1631–97), it is noted that the subject matter and techniques of such paintings were often determined by the status of the space in which they were displayed: ink-wash landscape paintings were typically placed in the most prestigious areas, followed by figure paintings in light colors, and finally, vibrant, full-color paintings of flowers and birds. The murals within Honmaru-goten Palace and Ninomaru-goten Palace follow this pattern, featuring ink-wash landscapes in the innermost, most exclusive sections, and vibrant, full-color flower-and-bird motifs elsewhere, thereby aligning with the hierarchy of subject matter and place described in *Honcho Gashi*.

The Kuroshoin and Ohiroma are the second and third rooms from the back of Ninomaru-goten Palace and both served as spaces for audiences with the shogun. While both feature murals depicting flowers and birds in rich, vibrant colors, the styles differ. In the Ohiroma, the wall surfaces from floor to ceiling are treated as a single, continuous canvas, featuring motifs such as massive pine trees and peacocks. In contrast, the Kuroshoin's audience space (First and Second Rooms) employs a different approach: *Okakiji-zu (Cherry Blossoms and Pheasants)* are depicted below the *nageshi* (horizontal beams), while *Rokaku Sansui-zu (Landscapes with Pavilions)* are rendered in ink and light color above the *nageshi*, on the *tsuke-shoin koshi-shoji* (paper sliding doors with wooden panels on the lower section used in the writing alcove) and elsewhere. Furthermore, the Kuroshoin features elaborate techniques not found in the Ohiroma, such as *moriage gofun* (a method of building up layers of white pigment to create a three-dimensional effect) for cherry blossom petals and garden fences, as well as the application of *kirihaku* (cut gold leaf) and *sunago* (sprinkled gold dust) around the golden clouds. By combining floral and avian motifs with landscape imagery, the latter being the most prestigious category in traditional painting, and by incorporating such intricate, labor-intensive techniques, the audience hall of the Kuroshoin is presented as holding a higher status than that of the Ohiroma.

Entertaining Court Nobles and the Function of the Kuroshoin

On the second day of the Kan'ei Imperial Visit, at Gyoko-goten Palace, Iemitsu presented luxurious gifts such as silver, cloth, and musk to the emperor, Iemitsu's sister and empress consort Masako (1607–78), the emperor's mother, Chukamonin (1575–1630), and the two princesses. Afterwards, the emperor, the empress consort, the emperor's mother, the retired shogun, the reigning shogun, and the court nobles all watched a performance of courtly dance and music, following which a meal was served to the audience. Ninomaru-goten Palace's Kuroshoin served as the venue for the court nobles' banquet, with seats reserved in the Second Room for members of the imperial family, the Sekke (the families of imperial regents and advisors), and high-ranking officials of the court; in the San-no-ma (Third Room) for the various high stewards and temple heads of aristocratic or imperial lineage; and in the Yo-no-ma (Fourth Room) and the east corridor (Botan-no-ma) for court nobles and high-ranking officials.

Fourteen individuals were seated in the Kuroshoin's Second Room. Among them were the heads of various princely houses, including Prince Hachijo Toshihito (1579–1629) and Prince Fushimi Sadakiyo (1596–1654) (along with their respective heirs), as well as Prince Takamatsu Yoshihito (1603–1638), and also such high-ranking court officials as the *kampaku* (chief advisor to the emperor) Konoe Nobuhiro (1599–1649), the *taiko* (retired *kampaku*) Takatsukasa Nobufusa (1565–1658), the *udaijin* (minister of the right) Ichijo Akiyoshi (1605–1672), and the *naidajin* (minister of the center) Nijo Yasumichi (1607–1666). Also present were the former *kampaku* Kujo Yukiie (1586–1665), who served as a vital link between the shogunate and the imperial court, and his son, Kujo Michifusa (1609–1647), who held the rank of *Ukone no Taisho* (Major Captain of the Right Division of Inner Palace Guards). In short, the gathering included the emperor's uncles and brothers, as well as other imperial court figures who stood second only to the emperor himself. Several of these men were also linked to the shogunate by marriage: Takatsukasa Nobufusa's daughter, Takako (1602–74), was the primary wife of the shogun Iemitsu, while Kujo Yukiie's wife, Sadako (1592–1658), was an older half-sister of Iemitsu. These connections offer a clear glimpse into the close ties that existed between the shogunate and imperial court.

It is said that, at this banquet, the *daimyo* (feudal lords) and *hatamoto* (direct retainers of shogun) aligned with the shogunate hosted the guests, serving an opulent meal on exquisite gold and silver tableware. Within a magnificent setting adorned with depictions of spring landscapes and mountain scenery—embellished with *kirihaku* and *sunago*—the shogunate entertained key figures from the imperial court. During the Kan'ei Imperial Visit, which was a major political event, the First and Second Rooms of the Kuroshoin played a vital role as a splendid banqueting venue which brought together the imperial court with the shogunate.

Following the imperial visit, when Shogun Iemitsu traveled to Kyoto in 1634, the Kuroshoin once again served as a setting for meetings with high-ranking members of the imperial court, including members of the Sekke, imperial princes, and high-ranking ministers, as well as temple heads of aristocratic or imperial lineage, imperial envoys, representatives of the retired emperor and the empress and empress's messenger. Furthermore, the shogun met with individuals of a different status than those present during the earlier imperial visit, such as the court noble Matsudono Michiaki (1615–46), son of Kujo Yukiie, and Hosokawa Tadatoshi (1586–1641), the daimyo of Kumamoto Domain. The Kuroshoin thus continued to function as a stage for the shogunate to engage with significant figures.

We invite you to experience the beauty of these murals that have been preserved for 400 years since the Kan'ei Imperial Visit and to envision the magnificent banquets that once unfolded amidst the walls and screens they adorned.

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